

# FAITH:

## ITS FREAKS AND FOLLIES

BY

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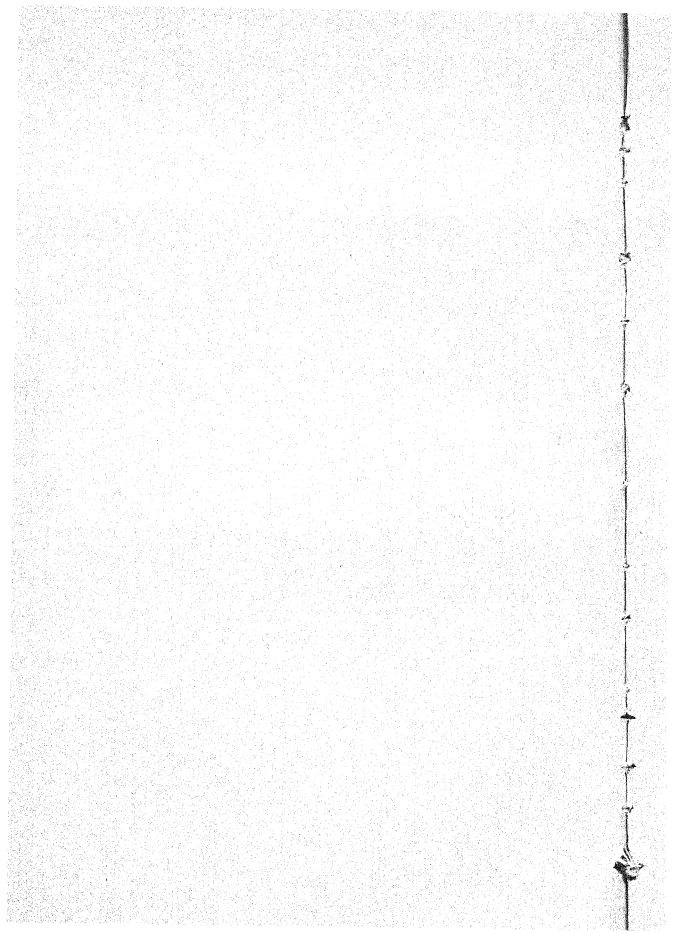


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# FAITH: ITS FREAKS AND FOLLIES

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## CHAPTER I.

### A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FAITH

CLEARNESS of definition is nowhere more needed or more difficult than in theology. Some little vagueness is, no doubt, unavoidable in a study the subject-matter of which is obscure and incapable of verification by physical tests. But beyond this natural defect religion has been unlucky in the variety of its exponents, who not merely find it impossible to come to permanent agreement on the precise significance of their doctrines, but differ as to the meaning of the terms employed to denote the conceptions underlying them. When to this we add the reflection that with the growth of human experience, and the consequent expansion of the human intellect, words become crammed with fuller and wider meanings, the idea growing while the language remains unaltered, we realise how impossible it is that theological terms should possess at all times a fixed and definite character. Faith is a word which well exemplifies this process of fluctuation. It is derived from the Latin *fides*—faith, belief, trust. In Italian we have *fede*; in old French, *feid*, *foit*; the last letter being dropped, we get *fei*, and in

time the modern *foi*. In old English we find *fay*, *fey*; later *feith*, which becomes the *faith* of our modern tongue. All these words mean belief, trust, fidelity. The Century Dictionary defines faith as a "firm belief based upon confidence in the authority and veracity of another, rather than upon one's own knowledge, reason, or judgment." With this definition all the best dictionaries are in substantial accord, and all agree that the special senses given to faith by theologians are not the natural and primary meaning of the word, but notions superadded to its original and predominant sense. It is with this original sense that the present examination mainly deals, and the following passages from Dean Hook's Church Dictionary may be quoted as justifying such a course:— "Faith, in its generic sense, either means the holding rightly the creeds of the Catholic Church, or means that very Catholic Faith which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved." It is added that when the priest is directed to inquire into the faith of the adult candidate for baptism he asks his assent to one of the creeds, and in the Office for the Visitation of the Sick he is required to use the same test. "There is no one word which has more significations than this has in the word of God, especially in the New Testament. It sometimes signifies the acknowledgment of the true God in opposition to heathenism; sometimes the Christian religion in opposition to Judaism; sometimes the believing the power of Christ to heal diseases; sometimes the believing that he is the promised Messiah; sometimes fidelity or faithfulness; sometimes the resolution of conscience concerning the lawfulness of anything; sometimes a reliance, affiance, or dependence on Christ, either for

temporal or spiritual matters ; sometimes believing the truth of all Divine relations ; sometimes the obedience to God's commands in the evangelical, not legal, sense ; sometimes the doctrine of the Gospel in opposition to the law of Moses ; sometimes it is the aggregate of all other graces ; sometimes the condition of the second covenant in opposition to the first : and other senses of it also there are, distinguishable by the contexture and the matter treated of where the word is used."<sup>1</sup>

Amid such a variety of meanings a simple Rationalist may be pardoned for confining his remarks to the plain and natural sense of the term. Clearly, this sense is *belief, trust*. This belief or trust is necessarily preceded by the facts of individual experience. One person trusts another because he knows enough of his character to justify reliance upon his conduct and belief in his words. Experience has taught him that his friend's conduct will be the same in the future as it has been in the past, and the strength of the trust depends on the probability of the other person's consistency ; if his knowledge, judgment, or veracity be deficient, belief is justly withheld. Let a traveller tell me that there is a race of dwarfs in the centre of Africa, and I should believe him, because the assertion, though strange, is not such as to arouse incredulity ; I have seen dwarfs, and the existence of a race of dwarfs is not wholly at variance with even my limited experience. If, however, the traveller goes on to declare that there is a race of centaurs in the desert of Sahara, I should withhold my belief, on the ground that the statement contradicts, not

<sup>1</sup> Hook's *Church Dictionary*.

merely my experience, but, so far as I can ascertain, that of all other persons. Statements made concerning matters previously unknown are, therefore, accepted or rejected according to our appreciation of the evidence by which they are supported. Where the evidence is clear and ample the belief is strong; where the evidence is weak the belief is correspondingly feeble. Even the inaccurate language of daily life recognises these distinctions. I fancy I saw from my window yesterday evening a friend crossing the street, but in the imperfect light could not be certain. I believe that free-trade is universally beneficial, but am not sufficiently well-informed to make a positive assertion on the subject. I am convinced, or feel sure, that vaccination is a preventive of small-pox, but it is possible that conflicting statistics may have misled my judgment. I know with the greatest certainty the fact of my own existence, since it is impossible to state anything to the contrary which does not assume it. All these statements indicate varying degrees of knowledge, from incomplete to perfect; and, however rapid the mental process may be, it is plainly nothing but an exercise of reasoning, a testing of probabilities, in the light of individual experience.

Faith is not a faculty by itself, distinct from reason. It is simply one of the modes in which the reason operates, and it cannot be considered to form a distinct element in the higher and more perfect manifestations of reason, the object of which is the acquirement and utilisation of knowledge. Faith is an effort towards knowledge; it is a guess, a feeling of trust, rendered necessary by the absence of knowledge. When knowledge is gained faith is

superseded, and is no longer necessary. All human faculties are means to the discovery of truth, and we are the less likely to attain the truth when our faculties are imperfectly exercised. No human powers are entirely trustworthy. Reason itself is far from infallible; but one peculiarity by which it is distinguished from faith is that its conclusions may be checked by comparison with the conclusions reached by other investigators, and verified or rejected according to the degree in which they conform to the premisses on which they purport to rest. Too often we observe a tendency to split up the internal powers of man into separate and sometimes conflicting entities. But the human mind is essentially one, operating in many different ways according to the nature of the objects with which it deals. Reason is a faculty or mode of operation of the mind; faith is the same faculty exerted on hypotheses instead of on facts. Reason is the higher, since it requires fuller knowledge—that is, a closer approximation to truth. Faith is the lower, since it is content with incomplete knowledge, even when fuller knowledge is obtainable. I believe in the existence of the city of Rome on the authority of others, but when I go there I no longer believe—I know. Its appearance, history, associations, are brought home to my senses with an almost magical effect. My knowledge is thus made far more complete, becomes a nearer approach to truth, than anything derived from belief in the testimony of others could ever be. Belief, therefore, is essentially imperfect knowledge, varying with the degree of evidence; and in the original and proper sense faith and belief both imply an assent of the mind to propositions which cannot be proved. It is not asserted

that faith is *identical* with belief, but that belief is its basis and starting-point. That faith is primarily belief is shown by the use of the term "Christian Faith" to designate a body of propositions purporting to rest on historical facts, and therefore to be intellectually apprehended, as well as by the fact that Christians themselves have adopted the term "believers" to indicate their mental attitude. Although in its origin an intellectual process, faith has become so largely associated with questions of an ethical and speculative nature that it has become a complex faculty, to which both intellect and feeling contribute an active share.

The stages through which the mind passes in its endeavours to ascertain the truth of anything are as follow :—

1. *Perception*—the mental act of apprehending and understanding the terms of a proposition.
2. *Opinion*—the acceptance, on evidence which is known to be imperfect, of a proposition as probably true.
3. *Conviction*—the persuasion formed after examination of evidence that a statement is true, while admitting a possibility that it may be untrue.
4. *Certitude*—a knowledge so clear and irrefragable that doubt is excluded.

It is with the second of these, opinion, that faith has the closest relation. Belief, or credence, is defined by Cardinal Newman, in his *Grammar of Assent*, to be an "implicit assent" to the truth of a given proposition. Opinion, however, is an "explicit assent" to its probability. While opinion rests upon some degree of evidence, faith disregards evidence altogether, and contents itself with authority. "When

we take a thing for granted, we have credence in it; when we begin to reflect upon our credence, and to measure, estimate, and modify it, then we are forming an opinion."<sup>1</sup> This appears a just distinction, and it is clear from it that, viewed as an intellectual operation, faith is of a somewhat lesser validity than even opinion, while falling far below conviction of the truth of a proposition, and still more below positive knowledge. Faith implies that *some* grounds exist for a particular belief, but not sufficient grounds to be called knowledge. It is obvious therefore that, on the strength of authority alone, faith assumes a knowledge, an approximation to truth, which it does not possess. The idea of authority is considered by Cardinal Newman essential to faith. Faith should, consequently, be able to justify the nature of the authority to which it appeals, and this can only be done by the reasoning faculties. Unless thus strengthened by reason, authority can never carry with it real certitude. Certitude, says Newman, "is a deliberate assent given *expressly after reasoning*." If therefore we choose to dispense with the reasoning, we have no right to the certitude. As a means of acquiring knowledge, authority cannot under any circumstances form a proper substitute for individual mental exertion.

It seems clear that, faith being a lower exercise of the reasoning faculty, there must always exist a certain opposition between the higher and the lower phases of the mind. Faith assumes; reason examines. Faith jumps to the top of the ladder; reason climbs step by step. As soon as imperfect knowledge on a

<sup>1</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, chap. iv., § 3.



given subject is followed by perfect knowledge, it is superseded and removed. When credence is merged in certainty, it is no longer credence; its place is taken by a fuller development of knowledge. It is equally true of the race and of the individual that faith decreases as knowledge grows; the greater absorbs the less. Possibly this fact may indicate a future disuse of the faculty of faith; as the need for it becomes less, it will cease to develop, because it will be merged in a higher mental process. True it is that faith is a prominent characteristic of ignorant times, while before growing enlightenment it steadily diminishes. The emotional feeling which appears to dignify faith is seen to be out of place when allowed to govern the operations of the intellect. When the mind has arrived at the suitable stage of development, the appeal to the emotions has to give place to the appeal to the understanding. "Each age of life has its own logic. The logic of the senses is in due season succeeded by that of the intellect. Of faith there are two kinds—one of acquiescence, one of conviction; and a time inevitably arrives when emotional feeling is supplanted by the intellect."<sup>1</sup> When faith is placed by its advocates in a position of open antagonism to reason, they cannot be sure they are not plunging deeper into error.

These considerations make it clear that, while faith may frequently afford consolation, its value as a test of truth is extremely slight, because it dispenses with the only known method by which the truth concerning everything external to the individual may be attained. It will hereafter be shown that in a

<sup>1</sup> Draper's *Intellectual Development of Europe*, vol. ii., p. 192.

collective sense its effects have frequently been of the most disastrous character. Not merely does the individual disregard truth, because he believes he already possesses it, but the enthusiasm generated in large masses of persons by a common purpose has, when unregulated by sober reason, led to the wildest excesses of credulity.

It has been established that, in proportion as faith becomes tinged with reason, it ceases to be faith. It comes to an abrupt stop at some indeterminate point a little beyond simple perception; it does not reach the stage of well-grounded opinion. It seeks to gain truth by a short cut, to have the delights of knowledge without the trouble of acquiring it. It works on a substratum of preconceptions, to which it clings in the blind assurance that they are final. But the purpose of the mind's activities is to increase in knowledge. If we rest in our preconceptions, and do not proceed to reason upon them in order to ascertain their value, we fail of that purpose. Faith, in fact, has no right to employ its materials as substitutes for the conclusions of reason. To remain content with possible error if the truth lies within our grasp is to fail in one of the obvious duties of life. Faith only attains certitude by ignoring the grounds of certitude. But the assurance thus derived is both illegitimate and delusive—illegitimate because it is a subjective feeling pure and simple, instead of a judgment founded upon fact and inference; delusive because it must be overthrown when confronted by a wider induction. Emotion is called in to fill up the gap caused by the absence of reason; it fills the nooks and crannies of the mind; it floods the soul with joy. The believer is happy in his state; he is

unable to conceive that it may be mingled with delusion; he is unwilling, perhaps unable, to advance in search of a knowledge which may prove the grave of his hopes. This religious ecstasy cannot be objected to as long as it is sincere, pure, and modest; indeed, it is often accompanied by high moral excellence. But too often this moral excellence is obtained at the expense of the still nobler faculty of reason, and the boundary between spiritual exaltation and objective fact becomes confused. Such a state of mind is too frequently allied to wilful ignorance and narrow bigotry to deserve universal respect. In all matters of objective fact truth is gained, not by subjective feeling, but by independent examination and logical analysis. Mere belief can have no binding force to those who do not share it. Belief should follow the testimony. Even a truth is wrongly held if held on grounds which are inadequate.

The claim that faith means much more than intellectual assent—that it implies a reverent confidence in, and spiritual communion with, God—is not without a certain degree of truth, though, of course, of a purely subjective kind. Trust cannot exist without some previous knowledge; but knowledge of God stands on a different footing from knowledge of any other description. The mere fact of belief in an object affords no necessary presumption that that object exists. On this subject the believer is in a dilemma. On the one hand, the so-called proofs of God's existence appeal to the understanding alone; on the other hand, spiritual emotions may be all-convincing to their possessor, but are no proof to another. How is individual belief to be translated into universal knowledge? Faith has assumed such

an infinite diversity of forms, has pledged itself to such an immense variety of objects, that its dicta have always been conflicting and unstable. Perhaps it is to be regretted that a conception so important as that of a Supreme Being should partake of this unsubstantial character; but the difficulty of establishing the actual existence of a reality outside the idea we form of it, of the finite satisfactorily conceiving the infinite, appears wholly insurmountable. It is remarkable, too, that as human knowledge grows, the unlikelihood of a solution being found becomes ever more widely recognised. Probably, from its nature, the idea of God cannot be proved to be anything more than an idea—cannot be shown to have any objective basis corresponding to it by which the speculative synthesis could be verified. This synthesis, being formed by a mind embodied in a material entity, naturally postulates an external entity to account for facts which it cannot fully comprehend. Not being cognisable by the senses, God cannot be proved to others. His real existence, therefore, can never get beyond the stage of assumption. So stimulating, however, has the assumption proved that to vast numbers of mankind it has been incomparably the greatest of all realities. The importance of the belief has made it powerful. "Real apprehension," says Cardinal Newman, "may be pronounced stronger than notional, because things, which are its objects, are confessedly more impressive and affective than notions, which are the objects of notional."<sup>1</sup> To many minds it must always seem a hopeless task to lift the idea of the divine out of the category of the notional into that

<sup>1</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, chap. iv., § 2.

of the real. Until it can be shown that the influence of the belief in God does result from an external reality corresponding to the idea, the Agnostic will believe that this influence is derived from the belief itself, *qua* belief. The feeling of fellowship experienced by the believer may, and naturally will, arise just the same from an intense belief in God as from actual knowledge of him, if such were possible.

The theologian insists that faith is something *sui generis*—not so much a special faculty as a supernatural influence, an actual gift from God, a miracle of grace, enabling man to enter into contact with a spiritual world of which he would without it remain entirely ignorant. The phenomena of "conversion" are occasionally adduced as proof of this. That an emotional cataclysm sometimes occurs in human beings is no evidence that it originates from a divine source. Such disturbances, however strange they may appear, are part of the natural capacity of mankind, though they are not the normal, nor the best, means by which character is built up. The essence of character-development is self-initiative, and continued personal effort, the slow and durable method of nature. The validity of the theologian's contention must, of course, depend on the success with which he can prove the existence and nature of deity, not as a subjective impression, but as an objective fact. To him faith means the uplifting of the whole nature, its surrender to divine impulses; an actual fellowship with the supreme spirit, which is believed—in some manner not clearly understood—to mingle with and influence the human spirit, of which it is the source. To one who partially sympathises with such a psychical condition, without admitting

that it is anything more than a subjective state of the mind, it appears that very clear proof of the existence of God as a person is a necessary antecedent. And what is meant by a person divested of all the conditions and limitations which make up the notion of human personality is exceedingly difficult to discover. In any case, faith in a person stands on a somewhat lower level than faith in a principle; it partakes of the nature of authority, and not of the nature of necessary truth. And the defect is greatly heightened if the person be suspected to be imaginary rather than real. That this is in doubt is proved by the endless controversy which has in every age gone on about God. Men do not for ever debate about that which they know. The fact of the discussion is, at any rate, incompatible with the claim for an indubitable divine revelation by God of his true character, otherwise the immense diversity of conceptions could not have arisen. It is a fair assumption, therefore, either that a personal God does not exist in any sense comprehensible by human beings, or that, if he exists, he has given no other revelation than is afforded by the thoughts of men themselves. In either case the conception of God is not one which commands "real assent," because it is not a universally acknowledged reality; it commands merely the "notional assent" given to that which may be nothing more than a phase of human thought. The eternal doubt on this point ought logically to paralyse the activity of faith, and in many cases does so. When we predicate the existence of God we run up against a mystery; but the recognition of this mystery as a fact gives us no right to venture on propounding doctrines concerning its nature.

The misdirected zeal of theologians has often unduly accentuated the natural differences between faith and reason. The fact that faith necessarily deals with a lower degree of evidence implies that its conclusions possess less certainty than the verified dictates of the understanding. They are tentative and hypothetical conclusions, which should always be held with the reservation that some other explanation is possible, while their subjective nature precludes them from apprehension by other minds, unless by way of sympathetic emotion. Faith has usually adopted precisely the opposite method; it has dogmatised in proportion to its ignorance. If, however, our beliefs are to vary with the weight of evidence, what are we to do when the evidence fails us? Is it right to assert that we then know the truth just as clearly as if we possessed the amplest confirmations of it? If it is wrong to believe a statement on false evidence, there must surely be an element of wrong in believing on no evidence at all. Subjectively, there are many degrees of certainty; but, as there can be no more certain truth than that involved in positive knowledge, the strength of the obligation to believe should logically depend upon the degree of truth obtainable. At what point in the scale can we stop, and say the process has changed its character, and become, not intellectual, but psychological; not natural, but spiritual? It is impossible to mark off man's immaterial nature into two sharply-defined divisions called "mind" and "soul," each dealing with its own set of phenomena, and those alone. Whatever diversities the inner nature may exhibit, it possesses an underlying unity far more characteristic than any dissimilarity.

## CHAPTER II.

### BIBLICAL CONCEPTIONS OF FAITH

WHILE both the Old and New Testaments are saturated with a belief in the efficacy of faith, only one writer purports to give a definition of the term. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are told that "faith is the assurance (or substance) of things hoped for; the proving (or test) of things not seen." A more unsatisfactory definition it would be difficult to frame. It bases faith, not on any evidence of fact, but on the subjective feelings alone. It assumes the objects of faith to lie in the realm of the unknown, instead of in the natural world in which we live. Doubtless the answer would be that this is precisely the nature and purpose of religious faith. In that case faith confesses itself to be an imperfect form of knowledge, the essence of which is completeness. The position adopted by the author of Hebrews can neither be proved nor disproved; it becomes a mere matter of individual sentiment. As, however, the objects of faith necessarily lie in a sphere outside itself, the reality of these objects must be evidenced by the ordinary methods of investigation; the subjective factor is incomplete without the objective factor to which it corresponds; the instrument is useless without the material on which it is to work. The scriptural writer's definition of these objects of faith as "things hoped for" and "things not seen" is vague



in the extreme. The nature of the "things" is not stated, nor any clue given to the process by which they are apprehended. It is certainly implied that the faculty of faith is mental rather than emotional, since it is not claimed to be a faculty distinct from the ordinary powers of the mind; but, on the other hand, the term "assurance" is ambiguous enough to cover any mental stage or stages between simple perception and logical proof. The second clause of the definition refers to faith as the proving, or test, of the things assumed to be the unseen objects of its activity. If by this is meant that faith is the faculty which examines and verifies the evidence for the existence of these unseen things, the statement cannot be considered as overweighted with accuracy. The weighing and testing of evidence is undeniably the work of the analytic intellect, and is, consequently, a function of a totally different nature from that spirit of faith which takes the truth of statements for granted because it trusts the authority which makes them. The whole of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a paean in praise of faith; but, while recognising the beauty of the language, it is clear that the term is not always used in an accurate or consistent sense. There is little value in the statement that "through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." The personification of the "word of God" is probably a survival of those speculations concerning origins which were common to both the Jews and the Christians of the first century. Whatever value may attach to such imaginative flights is far from scientific. In dealing with such a subject,

faith cannot be considered as being different from reason. It is the province of the scientific investigator to examine facts and propound theories as to the origin of the material world. Faith may form whatever theories it chooses; but, unless based on the appropriate facts of the physical order, its declarations are devoid of all scientific value. Whenever faith has interfered in matters of which it has been ignorant, the results have been singularly unfortunate—almost invariably a dogmatic pronouncement in favour of falsehood. In no case does science, or common sense either, consider it probable that visible things have been formed out of invisible things, if by that is meant that the universe was made out of nothing.

The references to Abel, Cain, Enoch, and Noah are drawn from sources which modern criticism has shown to partake more of the character of legend than of the character of truth, and it is surely waste of time to inquire into the motives of personages whose very existence is uncertain. The allusions to the faith of Abraham are quite unconvincing. Sober criticism cannot accept as historical occurrences the visions and personal interviews in which God is reported to have held communication with the patriarch; but, assuming their reality, the remarkable thing would have been that Abraham should *not* have reposed implicit belief in them. Considering the composite authorship and doubtful date of the chapters in which these narratives are related, the modern reader finds it difficult to share the reverence of the author of Hebrews for the traditions of the Jewish people. It is stated that the patriarchs saw the promises from afar, and rejoiced at the prospect

of some future but undefinable blessing. What these promises were is not entirely clear; they are usually assumed to foretell the coming of a redeemer; but there appears to be nothing in their original form to justify this interpretation. Most of the "promises" are to the effect that the descendants of Abraham should be as the sand on the sea-shore for multitude, and should be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. The note of exaggeration, of reading into the ancient records the ideas of a later time, is perceptible in the evangelical writer's expressions. Orthodox commentators assume the word "seed" to refer to the Messiah expected by the Jewish people. But the word has in most cases, probably in all, a plural significance, referring to the descendants of Abraham generally, though how far and in what sense the promise of blessing has been fulfilled, or, indeed, whether any promise was ever given at all, must be left to the ingenuity of rival exegetes, who are numerous enough in all conscience. The point for the Rationalist reader is that the New Testament writer, obviously enthusiastic and uncritical, reads into the old narratives hopes and aspirations of which the patriarchs themselves had no idea. Neither from their actions nor their recorded speeches can we gather that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had the smallest conception of the theological "scheme of salvation" of which they are assumed to furnish the types, and the truth of which is now so widely discredited. It may be doubted whether faith would ever have discovered the flaws in this so-called divine scheme without the searchlight of reason being projected upon it. Paul's argument in the third chapter of Galatians is a specimen of theological "reasoning." He interprets

the ancient covenant as being made "in Christ" because the word "seed" is in the singular number: "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." Of course, a reference to the passages alluded to shows the word "seed" to have been used in the plural.

The statement of the author of Hebrews that "Abraham offered up Isaac" is not quite accurate, for the account itself shows that the sacrifice was not completed. To treat Isaac as dead when he was alive, and to say that his father received him back from the dead "in a parable," does not conduce to enlightenment. The gross improbabilities of the story, the grown man of twenty-five being treated as a helpless chattel, the angel speaking out of heaven in the nick of time, and so forth, are commonly slurred over by writers whose faith urges them to believe the story rather than their reason to criticise it. It is almost impossible for the modern thinker to follow the Evangelical writer in accepting such supernatural incidents as historical. There are explanations of such narratives which appear more feasible than does the *Arabian Nights'* tinge imparted to them by Oriental imagination. But the task of sifting fact from legend cannot be attempted here; it is one of the pleasing uncertainties of many Scriptural narratives that there may be some truth at the bottom of them—but, then, there may not.

In some cases in the chapter under discussion, the term "faith" is used not merely in an ambiguous but in an irrelevant manner. The hiding of Moses must have occurred from the very natural wish to preserve his life rather than from any faith that he would accomplish great things when an old man. It is said

that his parents "were not afraid of the king's commandment." But fear of the king's commandment must have been precisely the reason why he was hidden. To assert that Moses accounted "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" is not merely the language of mysticism, but a distinct embellishment of the original story. There is not the slightest reference to Christ in the Genesis account. Of the statements that he forsook Egypt and kept the Passover through faith, one can but say that if God really instructed Moses by word of mouth to do these things there could have been little faith in his carrying out his instructions; it was practically a case of compulsory obedience. If God gave no such manifestation, the story is deprived of those supernatural elements belief in which appears to have been to the writer of Hebrews the surest test of faith. A very gentle degree of rationalism applied to the rest of the chapter will suffice to show its historical and ethical value. There is not a vestige of evidence that faith wrought the miracles alluded to, while there is distinct evidence that the accounts of some of these miracles are purely legendary. The expression, "stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire," is an obvious reference to the book of Daniel, which the writer, like Jesus himself, treated as reliable history instead of what it really is, religious fiction. The eloquent verses 33-39 allude to dreadful sufferings endured by persons unnamed, but probably Jewish patriots and prophets. That they suffered in the cause of religion may be true; that they looked for a better resurrection is an assumption of the writer. If they did believe in a resurrection, they did not derive the belief from the sacred scriptures of

their own nation. A certain want of sequence should also be noted in the argument, for, while some through faith "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises," and other blessings, the faith of others appears to have brought them nothing but a melancholy and unfortunate issue.

Several passages in the New Testament imply that it is through faith, and faith alone, that man can hope to attain pardon for sin. The idea seems to imply a radical misconception of the true nature of atonement for moral evil. It is not through belief or trust of any sort that such atonement can be secured. The true atonement is, as far as possible, to put right that which was wrong. For example, in the case of a person injured by theft, the only satisfactory atonement is to make up to him what he has lost, so that in the long run no permanent damage is sustained. This conception, however, scarcely applies to God, since it is impossible that the actions of men should injure, or even irritate, deity. The notion, in fact, that God is angry with sin, and requires the atonement of an innocent victim, is nothing but a survival of more barbarous ideas, and is utterly beyond the reach of verification. The righteous man, especially if of vigorous and combative nature, is apt to feel an intense indignation at the viler aspects of moral evil. His conception of deity, being subjective, is naturally tinged with the same emotional feeling, and leads to the doctrine that something more than mere repentance and amendment is necessary to ensure pardon, and consequent happiness, in a future state. Faith is assumed to supply the medium by which the burden of sin is transferred from the guilty to the innocent, and the spiritual relief thus obtained is taken as an

exhilarating proof of the reality of the transaction, in both an objective and a subjective sense. As soon as the conception of an intermediary between perfect God and sinful man is formed there is an almost inevitable tendency for the faith to be attached to the mediator rather than to God himself. Such a tendency is strongly exemplified in the Roman Catholic Church, where faith has become to a very large extent transferred, first from God to Christ, then from Christ to the Virgin Mary, and later to the numerous company of saints, whose intercession with the Virgin, with Christ, and with God respectively, is assumed to be necessary, or at least highly advantageous. Indeed, the tendency towards deification of the intermediary has fixed itself upon St. Joseph, the reputed father of Jesus, who, though assumed not to be the real father, is yet deemed worthy of worship because he happened to be the husband of Christ's assumed virgin mother !

One or two further passages from "Hebrews" may be very briefly glanced at. The Rationalist regards such an expression as "without faith it is impossible to please God" as morally objectionable, because it represents virtue as useless except when it is the outcome of a particular phase of the mind. It is a rash limitation of the divine goodness (assuming it to exist) to declare that God is angry with men for not believing in him, whether such belief is possible to them or not. In view of the acknowledged difficulty of forming any intelligible conception of an infinite personal Being, and of reconciling the existence of a perfect God with an imperfect creation, it is mere shallow dogmatism to assert that faith in God is essential or meritorious or easy. Even if it were,

its absence would not necessarily be sinful, or involve the actual infliction by perfect justice of those penalties which men have been so lavish in announcing. Dogmatism is objectionable either for or against such a view; the true attitude is that of the Agnostic, who recognises the fact that neither belief nor disbelief possesses any sufficient logical justification, and that where knowledge is impossible it is better to lay no claim to it.

The pious injunction of the Apostle James, that, if one "is sick he should call for the elders of the Church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins they shall be forgiven him," has been, and is still, the cause of much trouble. Ignorant piety naturally enough assumes that this text means what it says, and that, being divine, it must be true, especially as the promise is conveyed in such positive and unconditional terms. But when this form of piety brings its possessor into the police-court for manslaughter, the perplexed believer probably assumes that the arm of the law represents a conspiracy on the part of an alien world against a divine command. He loses his child and goes to prison really because he believes in the Bible, and withal remains unconvinced that the Bible is wrong and the police magistrate right. What, he asks, can the results of human science avail when they conflict with the express declarations of God's word? He is a monument of simple piety and Christian faith. To the Rationalist the words of James, in their utter confusion of physical and spiritual laws, and their ignorant confidence that



faith of this sort will procure the forgiveness of sins and a glorious resurrection, as well as the blessings of health, afford a melancholy illustration of the placid barrenness to which religious faith can reduce the human intellect. The mischief really results, of course, from the hopeless theory of the verbal inspiration of the Bible.

In view of the fact that Christian theology makes faith the central point of its scheme, it is surprising to find on examination of the discourses of Jesus that he did not appear to regard it in quite the same light. It is true that he makes frequent reference to faith, and assumes it to possess marvellous efficacy; but his public discourses dwell far more consistently on the power of an upright life to ensure eternal happiness, and continually imply man's ability to lead such a life without supernatural assistance. Isolated passages, particularly in the fourth Gospel, to some extent conflict with this view; but, on the whole, it seems clear that the public utterances of Jesus emphasised, not merely the paramount importance of the moral law, but the capacity of his hearers to fulfil it. The Sermon on the Mount is a prolonged illustration to this effect. It is, moreover, recorded that Jesus was on one occasion plainly asked to state the conditions on which salvation could be secured, and his answer appears conclusive on the point in question, though its significance is usually ignored by orthodox teachers. The reply given to the rich young ruler lays the whole stress of the obligation on *conduct*, and no reference is made to any form of belief, either in Jesus himself as a divine being or in any "scheme of salvation." If it be said that was an isolated instance, it cannot be denied that the

teaching conveyed is in general harmony with that usually employed by Jesus; and, as it was the only specimen of it with which the young ruler came in contact, it cannot be considered fragmentary as far as he was concerned. Jesus would surely not have deliberately misled an inquirer on the only occasion when he was able to enlighten him. And, if it be retorted that faith on the part of the latter is implied, the answer is that the only faith implied is faith in the validity of the moral law. Even the counsel of perfection recommended by Jesus is of a purely practical nature, and says nothing of the sanctity of unhesitating credence, spiritual communion with a divine being, or any subtlety of speculative theology.

On the other hand, various pronouncements of Jesus on the subject of faith appear to indicate a confusion of thought with which the modern Rationalist can have little sympathy. The incidents of the Centurion whose servant was healed, of the Syro-Phenician woman, the woman with an issue of blood, and others, cannot readily be admitted as historically free from the doubt in which all supernatural manifestations are involved. But, assuming their accuracy, the faith which Jesus commended and so richly rewarded bears a good deal of resemblance to that ignorant belief in the miraculous virtues of holy relics which is probably an advanced form of fetish worship, and which is still exhibited at St. Winifred's Well, the grotto of Lourdes, and other holy shrines of the present day. Some of the sayings of Jesus as to the power of faith are altogether extravagant. He declared that the smallest degree of faith, even though it were but "as a grain of mustard seed," would enable its possessor to remove trees and

mountains, and work miracles such as he is recorded to have wrought, and even to do "greater works." The power to effect this he seems to have regarded as due to his faith in God, though Christendom has generally considered it as due rather to the assumed fact that he was God. Criticism of such hyperbolic language is unnecessary, but it should be pointed out that, on the orthodox assumption of its truth, the world has yet to see the effects of Christian faith on a scale adequate to its pretensions. The failure to exhibit it shows either that the promise of such power was never given, or that the faith possessed by subsequent generations has been too infinitesimal to be represented by even the tiny grain of mustard seed.

Paul is the leading exponent of faith in the New Testament, and it is from his unsystematic reasonings that the Christian system has been mainly evolved—with too little regard for the simple ethics of its founder. To examine Paul's doctrines in detail would involve a discussion of the whole interminable subject of Justification, which was pretty thoroughly threshed out during the sixteenth century. The apostle's teachings are a strange mixture of breadth and narrowness, wisdom and folly, generous freedom and timid subservience to tradition. The distinction he draws in the case of Abraham, whose faith "was accounted to him for righteousness," tends to foster the idea that faith may be a substitute for right conduct, and illustrates the danger which attends any separation of faculties which should, as far as possible, work in harmony. On the strength of such reasoning persons in ignorant ages have been very apt to follow the example of Abraham himself, and assume that

their faith would serve instead of social virtue. Abraham's faith did not prevent him from lapsing into unwise and ignoble deceits, which are difficult to account for on the supposition that his life was under almost constant divine guidance; indeed, some of his recorded actions plainly imply distrust or disregard of that divine guidance, and cannot, therefore, be regarded as shining examples of his characteristic virtue.

The teaching of Paul is largely concerned with the antithesis between faith and law, which he enforces with power and eloquence. As, however, he did not clearly define what he meant by the term "law," it is somewhat difficult to follow his involved argument. If he meant the whole body of Jewish ceremonial, he was right in maintaining that obedience to law could not justify man; that all men had sinned, and by the law were therefore to be held guilty. The Mosaic law dealt with specific offences, and, theoretically, it would seem by no means impossible for a man to avoid committing them, and consequently be legally guiltless. If, however, he referred to the Ten Commandments, his reasoning seems to conflict with Christ's claim that man could, and should, fulfil the law. Jesus plainly taught that the spirit of love to God and man was a practical fulfilment of the moral law, whether in his own time or earlier. Doubtless it was the burdensome particularity of the Pharisaic traditions which Paul had in mind; but his assertion that all men were under the "law of sin" until the advent of Christ was never made by Christ himself. Paul appears to have had a love for generalisations which he had not the patience to work out logically, or he would hardly on such a slender basis of fact have

made the assumed death of all men in Adam, and their equally assumed life in Christ, the cornerstones of his theology. It is, perhaps, not remarkable that his mission was so successful, for the realisation in the individual conscience of freedom from the consequences as well as the dominion of sin by the simple process of accepting a proffered grace (faith being considered not as a mere effort of the human will, but as the free gift of God) would naturally have great attractions for a world which was becoming weary of ceremonial, and was yearning for fresh and vivifying moral impulses. To those who could believe with Paul that their own volitions were for the time superseded, and that they were supernaturally endowed with a new and vigorous motive-power, the process of leading a better life would present little difficulty. Whether or not mistaken as to the nature of the objects on which it can be legitimately exercised, faith has in the past furnished a motive of extraordinary force and persistency; its drawback is that it so readily lends itself to excess and superstition. St. Paul's teaching has at least one great merit, that of not being vitiated by the gloomy doctrine of eternal torment. What his precise ideas on this subject may have been is not clear; but their general drift lay in the direction of universalism, a buoyant confidence that the redemption of Christ was available for, and would ultimately be shared in by, every human being, and that it involved a restoration of mankind to the moral integrity lost by the calamity of the first man's disobedience. The fact that he made a vicarious atonement the object of faith did not present to the age of Paul the perplexing moral problems which more advanced thought has discovered

in the theory. Nor did the frequent use he made of doubtful Jewish traditions weaken his argument in the estimation of his hearers as it does in that of the cultivated intelligence of modern times.

## CHAPTER III.

### FAITH AS DEFINED BY THE CHURCHES

THE following extracts from the "Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith," issued by the Œcumenical Council in 1870, set forth the views of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to Faith and Reason. The quotations are taken from Dr. Draper's *Conflict between Religion and Science* :—

*Of Faith.* Inasmuch as man depends on God as his Lord, and created reason is wholly subject to uncreated truth, he is bound when God makes a revelation to obey it by faith.<sup>1</sup> This faith is a supernatural virtue, and the beginning of man's salvation, who believes revealed things to be true, not for their intrinsic truth, as seen by the natural light of reason, but for the authority of God in revealing them.

Concerning this it may be sufficient to remark that the intrinsic truth of anything is the strongest possible ground for believing it, and that the principle of believing solely upon authority would naturally lead to believing on authority that which was not merely opposed to reason, but that which was utterly false and mischievous. And, obviously, this question of the obligation to believe, the question of the existence of God and the question of the reality of the "revelation," must necessarily be determined by the intellectual process.

<sup>1</sup> "God forceth not a man to believe that which he cannot understand."—*Wycliffe*.

*Of Faith and Reason.* The Catholic Church has ever held, and now holds, that there exists a twofold order of knowledge, each of which is distinct from the other, both as to its principle and its object. As to its principle, because in the one we know by natural reason, in the other by divine faith; as to the object, because, besides those things which our natural reason can attain, there are proposed to our belief mysteries hidden in God, which, unless by him revealed, cannot come to our knowledge.... For God's mysteries in their very nature so far surpass the reach of created intellect that, even when taught by revelation and received by faith, they remain covered by faith itself as by a veil, and shrouded as it were in darkness, as long as in this mortal life. But, although faith be above reason, there never can be a real disagreement between them, since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has given man's soul the light of reason, and God cannot deny himself, nor can one truth ever contradict another. Wherefore the empty shadow of such contradiction arises chiefly from this, that either the doctrines of faith are not understood and set forth as the Church really holds them, or that the vain devices and opinions of men are mistaken for the dictates of reason. We therefore pronounce false every assertion which is contrary to the enlightened principle of faith.

This has the merit of plainness. It is an express declaration that, should a contradiction, real or apparent, arise between reason and faith, the former has to give way and allow faith an undisputed supremacy. It need hardly be said that, in proportion as such teaching is received, the greater is the advantage to the Roman Catholic Church.

Not only is it impossible for faith and reason ever to contradict each other, but they rather afford each other mutual assistance. For right reason establishes the foundation of faith, and by the aid of its light cultivates the science of divine things; and faith, on the other hand, frees and preserves reason from errors, and enriches it with knowledge of many kinds. So far, then, is the Church from opposing the culture of human arts and sciences that she rather aids and promotes it in many ways.

One knows not whether to be more amazed or amused at the unblushing impudence of the Papal claim to divine authority on matters in which the



true jurisdiction must necessarily lie with the individual conscience. If divine truth is far beyond "the reach of created intellect," it is surely impossible for it to be either "taught by revelation" or "received by faith." The statement that, even when revealed, its mysteries are "shrouded," as it were, in darkness is obviously an ingeniously-constructed loophole by which the force of hostile criticism may be evaded. As for the claim that reason establishes the foundation of faith, some of the Church's dogmas are avowedly exempted from scrutiny on the ground that the tests of reason are inapplicable to them. It is purely on the ground that the doctrine of transubstantiation is incomprehensible by reason that it is required to be received by faith. It is evident the terms "faith" and "reason" are both used in senses arbitrarily determined by only one party to the discussion. That the Church has encouraged art is true, so far as it goes; but it has, of course, been where art was useful to her: secular art has received little ecclesiastical patronage. On the other hand, her obstinate and ignorant opposition to science, and that on the express ground that it conflicted with her own authoritative teaching, has been as notorious as it has been unsuccessful.

The Church of England declares by the eleventh of her Thirty-nine Articles that "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings, wherefore that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort." And, again, in Article 18: "They also are to be had accursed that presume to say that every man shall be saved by the law or sect

which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that law and the light of nature. For Holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the name of Jesus Christ whereby men must be saved." Article 13 emphasises the same view by stating the belief of the framers that works done apart from faith in Christ "have the nature of sin."

If we take the authority of Jesus himself as being superior to that of his followers, we shall find little warrant for these confident assertions. Whatever one or two isolated texts may say, the whole tenour of his teaching refutes the falsity that man's natural efforts towards virtue "have the nature of sin."

The Athanasian Creed is a formal attempt to define in terms of reason two of the principal doctrines of the Christian faith—viz., the Trinity and the Incarnation. The results are singularly poor. Viewed as a mere effort of the human intellect, this creed—which is generally acknowledged to be a forged party pamphlet directed against the Arian "heretics"—is a masterpiece of futile hair-splitting on a subject of which its author knew nothing whatever. That he should define the undefinable is not wonderful—everyone thought he could do that in the fifth century; but that he should damn everybody else for not understanding what he did not understand himself would appear humorous if it had not been a matter of life or death to many a poor wretch in those ferocious and bigoted ages. And, considering that most human beings have some slight degree of common sense, it is surprising that such an intellectual monstrosity should have obtained an authoritative place in the formulas of the Church, and retained it unto this day. It is a misuse of reason

to assert that which violates reason, and then impiously to threaten penalties which cannot be inflicted to secure a conformity which must be a sham. It is to reason that the creed avowedly appeals; but, when reason points out its absurdities, its defenders fall back on faith as the only clue to its mysteries. It is mentioned here to illustrate the contention that faith is essentially belief in unprovable statements, and to show that the Christian Church has for the most part understood it in that sense. Article VIII. of the Anglican Church distinctly relies on reason in its declaration that the Athanasian Creed "may be proved by most certain warrant of Holy Scripture."

With regard to the Presbyterian Church, chapter xi. of the Westminster "Confession of Faith" also states that faith is the gift of God, and that through faith the "obedience and satisfaction of Christ are imputed to justified sinners, who can never fall from the state of justification."

The "Declaration of Faith and Order" of the Congregational Union, though not a document binding on the individual Churches which comprise the Independent body, sufficiently represents their views; it agrees with the other manifestoes in stating that men are "justified through faith in Christ," of which faith good works are the necessary fruit.

The general drift of these declarations is that faith—that is, the belief in certain unverifiable statements—is of far greater importance than all endeavours of man to lead a pure and upright life.

A considerable body of evangelical Christians are known as Baptists, and their most celebrated preacher was the late Mr. Spurgeon. Turning over some

volumes of his sermons, one cannot but be struck with the intense earnestness of feeling, the easy flow of homely but eloquent language, the endless store of anecdote and illustration, as well as the extraordinary narrowness and one-sidedness of the man, and the marvellous knack he had of evading the natural meanings of the texts he used. Though not laying down any coherent system of belief, the whole burden of his preaching was to unduly exalt faith at the expense of reason. Reason is feeble, faith is mighty; reason is a candle, faith is a sun. His ideas of faith may be inferred from his ideas of the want of it. So plain is it to him that the Bible is wholly and entirely God's Word that any doubt—even the smallest—of its divine authority is a sin, and the sin of unbelief is the crowning and damning sin of man—a sin for which Christ never made any atonement (it is not easy to see on what authority he makes this daring statement)—a sin “greater than all other guilt rolled into one vast globe of black corruption”! Comment on such ravings is needless.

The length to which theological notions of “justification” have led Christian teachers is exemplified in a passage by a certain Dr. Crisp, quoted in *Orthodoxy, Scripture, and Reason*, by the Rev. William Kirkus: “Hast thou been an idolater, a blasphemer, a despiser of God's Word, a profaner of His name and ordinances, a thief, a liar, a drunkard? If thou hast part in Christ, all these transgressions of thine become *actually the transgressions of Christ, and so cease to be thine*, and thou ceasest to be a transgressor from the time that they were laid upon Christ to the last hour of thy life.” Would not this in an enemy be “rank blasphemy”?

The net result of the official declarations above quoted is that creed is higher than life, dogma, nobler than duty, an assumed, fluctuating, subjective knowledge of greater importance than acts of natural goodness. Such ideas, apart from their falsity, must have a prejudicial effect on social welfare. They foster an unreasoning selfishness, promote distorted views of religion, lead ignorance to think itself knowledge, and by deeming truth already possessed discourage the effort to gain it. Moral sensibility is inevitably blunted when belief is exalted above life. "One of the most obvious consequences," says Mr. Lecky, "of the doctrine of exclusive salvation is that it places the moral in permanent subordination to the dogmatic side of religion. If there be a Catholic faith, 'which except a man believe he cannot be saved,' it is quite natural that men should deem it 'before all things' necessary to hold it. If the purest moral life cannot atone for error, while a true religion has many means of effacing guilt, the mind will naturally turn to the doctrinal rather than to the practical side."<sup>1</sup> He adds: "The most revolting aspect of this subject is the notion that heretics are so intensely criminal as to have no moral rights—a favourite doctrine in Catholic countries where no Protestant or sceptical public opinion exists."<sup>2</sup> Some illustrations will presently be given of the manner in which this principle—the supremacy of doctrine over life—has influenced human conduct in the past.

<sup>1</sup> *History of Rationalism*, vol. i., p. 392.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

## CHAPTER IV.

### FAITH IN RELATION TO MORALS

It has been sufficiently shown that, in spite of theological claims to the contrary, faith is not a faculty by itself, acting apart from the understanding. It is merely a function or mode of operation of the governing faculty of reason, though in its results less certain than the process of inference, because dealing with objects the existence of which cannot be verified. It is precisely because knowledge of the unknown is not available that faith has appropriated it as its own peculiar province. In a purely speculative sense faith is neither moral nor immoral. The term "morality" does not apply to opinions resting on a purely speculative basis, unless those opinions are translated into action. The morality of faith must, therefore, be sought, not in its nature, but in its tendencies and results, and for this purpose historical examination of those results becomes necessary. The lavish assumption that faith is so paramount a quality that its possession is alone sufficient to secure the salvation of the believer needs to be corrected by examination of the forms under which it has been manifested in the past. Only in that way can we appreciate the extent to which faith has proved itself an untrustworthy guide to life, not only in assuming knowledge which it did not possess, but in carrying that

imaginary knowledge into action prejudicial to social welfare.

While faith often gives a consolation which even the strenuous truthseeker would be loth to destroy, it must not be forgotten that the grounds of such a feeling cannot be permanently exempted from investigation. It is not very brave to seek the backwaters of the stream of knowledge and take no part in the noble turmoil of the rapids. Guyau says: "Morality should command the mind to search without resting—that is to say, precisely to guard itself against faith."<sup>1</sup> Certainly the assumption of knowledge concerning what is unknown does not facilitate either the attainment of greater knowledge or a just sense of the mind's limitations.

The moral value of faith is so largely determined by the character of the objects on which it is exercised that some slight examination of these objects becomes essential. Faith has many degrees, from the elevating trust of the enlightened Theist to the piety of the bandit who beseeches the Virgin to send him a wealthy victim. The Rationalist may clearly perceive the purity of the former belief, while considering that the predominance in it of subjective feeling renders it unreliable as a substitute for reason or as a criterion of truth. Its emotional value depends on the degree of comfort it affords; but its intellectual value depends on the nature of the evidence by which its objective reality is supported. In what sense the theory of God is true will never be established to the satisfaction of everyone. Each person necessarily

<sup>1</sup> *Sketch of Morality*, p. 63.

has his own conception of a deity, differing from that of every other person by virtue of the fact that its form is determined by his own mind. But if the inquirer looks around him for an external standard of truth he looks in vain, unless he chooses to accept on authority explanations which carry him no further than he can take himself. Whether we examine nature or the Bible, we are forced to the conclusion that neither any clear conception of a personality sufficient to account for the totality of existence, nor any consistent exhibition of moral character, is to be found. Each person, in proportion to his knowledge, interprets nature in the light of his own ideas. And the variety of opinions in reference to the Bible is evidence enough that each applies the same principle to the alleged divine revelation. The Roman Catholic Church has a simple method of avoiding this confusion. She requires "implicit faith" in her teaching—that is, an avowed surrender of the individual reason. This, however, is immoral, because the value of knowledge lies, not merely in its effects, but in the effort to acquire it; and to cease to strive for it would be destructive of many of the noblest human activities. The acceptance of the dogma of Papal infallibility not merely involves acceptance of any falsity which Papal infallibility may happen to propound, but logically discourages all further mental activity and research, and so, by causing mental stagnation, gives rise to the possibility of the most foolish and pernicious superstitions.

Faith proves the existence of God by elaborate appeals to the reason. Such appeals will be made as long as all human beings do not possess the precise union of imperfect knowledge and spiritual emotion



necessary to give birth to uniformity of faith. The question of the being of God is not a mere internal sentiment; it is a philosophical doctrine, to be justified or rejected on grounds of reason. The very nature of faith implies trust in an object. But whether that object be a real or an imaginary one is for reason to determine, if it can. Descartes, in the Preface to his *Metaphysical Meditations*, has an apt word on this point: "I have always deemed the two questions of God and of the soul the chief among those matters which ought to be demonstrated by reasons of philosophy rather than of theology; for, although it is enough for us who are faithful to believe through the faith that there is a God, and that the human soul does not die with the body, it certainly does not seem possible that we can ever persuade infidels to any religion, or even to any moral virtue, if we do not first prove these two things to them by natural reason." How is it to be shown that the believer's trust is rightly placed? From the nature of the case it is impossible to prove that God is a person, and it follows that we cannot be sure that God is a proper object of trust. We cannot prove that the experiences we undergo result from *conduct* on the part of a person. The phenomena of nature may doubtless be regarded as God's dealings with us; but they are capable of another and more rational interpretation—they may be regarded simply as facts of a physical order, which originated we know not how. Knowledge ends with the material phenomena; beyond conjecture holds the field, and explanation becomes guesswork. What right have we to go beyond the facts, and lay down transcendental theories of causation? How far does the assumption

of a personal God carry us? It is extremely doubtful whether he can be properly regarded as an object of trust or faith unless it can be shown that he treats human beings with at least the same consistency that they would have a right to expect from a human friend. But a believer in God is liable to the same eccentric operation of natural laws as a disbeliever; he is at any moment liable to injury or death by fire or tempest or shipwreck or explosion, perhaps from some trivial neglect on the part of another. Natural laws are not, and cannot be, set aside for the sake of the individual. But the popular notions of religion assume that they can, and will be, so set aside by the influence of faith and prayer. This view is refuted by facts every day of our lives; that the religious consolation to which it has given birth survives the process of destruction merely shows its foundation to be subjective and probably illusory. Some actual variation of the material order must be proved before it can be reasonably held that particular individuals are either favoured or punished by Providence. Unless he is in a position to do this, the believer is not justified in holding that he receives from God treatment of so consistent and regular a character as to justify his faith. Regarded as belief in an external order necessarily open to scrutiny by reason, faith is seen to go beyond the facts, and to that extent is erroneous and misleading. Large numbers of well-meaning persons cling to belief in a Providence which will take care of them personally, in spite of the fact that this same Providence allows millions of other human beings to die of violence and starvation; in spite of the fact that natural laws take their course absolutely regardless of anyone's beliefs.

In holding definite convictions on this subject, faith usurps the province of reason, and reason cannot form definite convictions for lack of data. If there is a God, and if he influences mankind through the phenomena of nature, it is these phenomena which must be made the subject of investigation. Here we get out of the region of subjective feeling, and enter that of science. If it is a matter of fact that there exists a Providence which in any special sense cares for the interests of each believer, its influence, as acting by means of material agencies, must be discernible by the ordinary operations of the reason.

In discussing the morality of faith this belief in Providence may be taken as a representative theory. If it can be proved from the facts of life, it would imply the existence of a personal God. If, in spite of dealing so largely with the facts of the physical order, it cannot be proved, the belief is in all probability false. To the Agnostic, at any rate, it is a survival of superstition, not the fruit of a scientific induction.

Explanations of the facts of life must, in their general character, be either natural or supernatural, and it is a safe rule that a natural explanation is to be preferred if it adequately accounts for the phenomena. The first implies that the operations of nature form part of an invariable system of order, which, though within certain limits modifiable by human action, is neither violated nor modified by any unknown agency external to man and nature; that the phenomena happen just as they would happen if no intervention took place, and that without actual proof of such intervention the belief in it is not

justifiable. The second kind of explanation necessarily implies that the system of nature is constantly being altered by a superior power to favour particular individuals. The religious comfort derived from such a belief must, however, be pronounced highly fallacious; it is not merely an unwarrantable piece of egotism to assume that the methods of nature are modified in my favour, though not in favour of others; but, in point of fact, we are quite able to perceive that natural laws do, by their invariable sequences, produce the various inequalities of human life, and therefore supernatural explanations are totally unnecessary. The readiness with which these superfluous explanations are still resorted to further illustrates the survival of antiquated modes of thought. A popular prince escapes assassination, in consequence of the bullet missing him by a few inches. The Press and the public generally exult over the providential, the miraculous, preservation of a valuable life. On another occasion, however, a life equally blameless is sacrificed to the fury of the murderer. If the one is providential, why not the other? If any divine power intervened to deflect the bullet aimed at the Prince of Wales, how can we understand its neglect to save the life of the Empress of Austria? A rational interpretation of the facts is puzzled by no such conundrum. While the religious view has to account for gross partiality and inconsistency, which on the face of them reveal the so-called Providence as unreliable and entirely unmoral, the Rationalist finds a sufficient explanation in the known character and operation of the laws of nature. He recognises that in individual cases these laws often work harshly, and that in this fact lies the source of the alacrity with

which people fly to an imaginary relief. But the rational thinker does not charge the cruelty on a *person*, and that person one whom he worships as the incarnation of all that is good.

The belief in Providence cannot be examined here in adequate detail. What we are concerned with is chiefly its morality. If the phenomena do not justify it, the belief cannot be truly moral, either in its essence or in its tendency, since it is a violation of truth to frame generalisations which contradict the facts they purport to explain. Now, a belief which assumes—and that in defiance of the evidence—divine favouritism of the few and divine neglect of the many cannot be ethically ennobling. A trifling circumstance at the last moment prevents a passenger from travelling by a certain train. In crossing the Tay Bridge a furious storm hurls the train bodily into the sea, and every single traveller is lost. The escape of the traveller left behind is, of course, looked upon (by him) as “providential.” One can understand the temptation to think it so without being convinced of its truth. Is it really reverent to a divine Being to consider that he in any way influences the course of things in order to save one person from violent death, while, by the same course of action, allowing a hundred others to meet it, and that without furnishing the parties interested the smallest clue as to his motive, or even assuring them of the fact that he interferes at all? And were not the material facts sufficient in themselves to explain the catastrophe? No one doubts that they were. On the two grounds, therefore, of the adequacy of the natural explanation, and the impossibility of reconciling the supernatural explanation with a rational conception of the divine

Being of whose nature it is supposed to be a direct outcome, the belief in Providence must be pronounced erroneous, and inconsistent with an enlightened ethical conception.

That faith has a pure, an amiable, a beneficent side cannot be doubted. This depends greatly on the nature of that in which faith is reposed. Those who accept as true the representations of God given in the Old Testament must either believe that righteousness is one thing with man and another thing with God, or must have their moral conceptions seriously tarnished and perturbed by the mere wish to imitate him. It is useless to point to the good elements, and say they prove the conception to be true. What has to be accounted for is, not that God is represented as occasionally good, but that he is represented as frequently bad. The Bible holds up a conception of God which no man dares seriously attempt to imitate, though the Bible itself commands him to do so. That the effort has involved the gravest social danger needs little illustration. Unless controlled by reason, faith but too often fails to discern the true difference between good and evil, and so lends itself to intolerance, fanaticism, and cruelty. The practical effect of believing that to be good in God which would be evil in man is to falsify the moral ideal, and in many cases to reverse the normal relations of human beings. Humane men have been known to be cruel, not because they wished to be so, but because they have been assured by faith that God has commanded them to be so.

Faith in the supernatural arises mainly from ignorance of the natural. An easy belief in miracles deceives people into the expectation that supernatural aid will get them out of trouble, and consequently

discourages individual exertion and the spirit of self-reliance. In accordance with this principle we find that wherever faith is least checked by reason the belief in the supernatural flourishes, and scientific knowledge is lightly esteemed. That "Ignorance is the mother of Devotion" has passed into a proverb. It may be said that all this is nothing but superstition. Very likely; but faith inevitably becomes superstition when the guidance of the judgment is avowedly discarded. Reason and faith being assumed to be in deadly opposition, the more faith and the less reason the believer possesses, the purer is supposed to be the state of his soul, and faith then degenerates into spiritism, demoniac possession, witchcraft, and other forms of superstition. The most singular instances are on record of the length to which this form of credulity was carried, particularly in those Puritan times when the revival of religious faith brought with it a vast increase of morbid spirituality. Not only were evil spirits believed to be engaged day and night in vindictive assaults upon human souls, but the Devil himself was frequently believed to appear in bodily shape, and caused the most intense anxiety and terror to Christian men and women. The most trivial incidents were manifest tokens of his presence. Undoubting faith and sincerity appear in the following account:—

I heard a voice just before me, on the other side of the hedge, and it seemed to be like the groaning of an aged man. It continued so some time. I knew no man could be there; for on the other side of the hedge, where I heard the groaning, there was a great stank or pool. I nothing doubted but it was Satan, and I guessed his design; but still I went on to beg the child's life. At length he roared, and made a noise like a bull, and that very loud. From all this I concluded that I had been provoking God some way or other in the duty,

and that he was angry with me, and had let the enemy loose on me, and might give him leave to tear me in pieces. This made me entreat of God to show me wherefore he contended, and begged he would rebuke Satan. The enemy continued to make a noise like a bull, and seemed to be coming about the edge towards the door of the summer-seat, bellowing as he came along.<sup>1</sup>

Another panic-stricken pietist relates that at any sudden noise he would "start and shiver, the seeing of a dogg made me affrayed, the seeing of a stone in the feild made me affrayed, and, as I thought, a voice in my head, saying, 'It's Satan.'"<sup>2</sup> On one occasion the celebrated Alexander Peden began a sermon as follows: "There is three or four things that I have to tell you this day; and the first is this: A bloody sword, a bloody sword, a bloody sword, for thee, O Scotland, that shall reach the most part of you to the very heart. And the second is this: Many a mile shall ye travel in thee, O Scotland, and shall see nothing but waste places"; and so on *ad libitum*. Along with this there went a belief in hell, which, for savage malevolence and unintentional blasphemy, has never been surpassed. In Woodrow's *Analecta* is preserved an account of hell, which the clergy asserted to have been communicated by a boy who had been conveyed thither, and who stated: "Ther wer great fires, and men roasted in them, and then cast into rivers of cold water, and then into boyling water; others hung up by the tongue." Nor were Christian ministers afraid to attribute these horrors to the direct action of God. "Consider," says the Rev. Thomas Halyburton, "who is the contriver of these torments. There have been some very exquisite torments contrived by the wit of man, the naming of

<sup>1</sup> Buckle's *History of Civilisation*, vol. iii., p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.



which, if ye understood their nature, were enough to fill your hearts with horror; but all these fall as far short of the torments ye are to endure as the wisdom of man falls short of that of God. Infinite wisdom has contrived that evil."<sup>1</sup> The state of mental distress induced by such appalling doctrines in the minds of the poor, credulous wretches who put entire faith in them was such that they sometimes committed suicide in the hope of ending their misery. A preacher at Jedburgh declared: "There are two thousand of you here to-day, but I am sure fourscore of you will not be saved"; upon which "three of his ignorant hearers, being in despair, despatched themselves soon after."<sup>2</sup> The simple and powerful language of the following extract brings home to the mind far more vividly than any description the outlook which life presented to many:—

Now I saw myself to be a condemned criminal; but I knew not the day of my execution. I thought that there was nothing between me and hell but the brittle thread of natural life. And in this dreadful confusion I durst not sleep, lest I had awakened in everlasting flames. And Satan violently assaulted me to take away my own life, seeing there was no mercy for me. Soon after this I was again violently assaulted by the tempter to take away my own life; he presented to me a knife therewith to do it, no person being in the house but myself. The enemy pursued me so close that I could not endure so much as to see the knife in my sight, but laid it away. One evening, as I was upon the street, Satan violently assaulted me to go into the sea and drown myself; it would be the easiest death. Such a fear of Satan then fell upon me as made my joints to shake, so that it was much for me to walk home; and when I came to the door I found nobody within; I was afraid to go into the house lest Satan should get power over me.<sup>3</sup>

The changes in the weather were supposed to be the

<sup>1</sup> Buckle's *History of Civilisation*, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

direct result of divine agency, and, whenever they had a prejudicial effect on agriculture, were manifest signs of God's displeasure. "Men sweat, till, sow much, and the sun and summer, and clouds, warme dewes, and raines, smile upon corn and meadowes, yet God steppeth in between the mouth of the husbandman and the sickle, and blasteth all." And "When the Lord is provoked he can not only send an affliction, but so order it by faire appearance of a better lot and heightening of the sinner's expectation and desire, as may make it most sad."<sup>1</sup> Superstition undeniably; but how was it that the "Word of God," which was devoutly studied, and to an extent of which we have little conception, did not remove this superstition? As a matter of fact, the study of the Bible fostered and intensified this frame of mind to an alarming degree. The spirit of those times—ignorant, credulous, and ferocious—found in the Bible a sufficiently analogous spirit, and a sufficient number of unmistakable texts, to support its barbarous views. The personality of the devil, and his interference in human affairs, are plainly implied in both the Old and New Testaments. The conception of a never-ending hell of physical torture is there asserted with a distinctness which the scholarship of the time could not question. The changes in the seasons, the rain, the dew, the sunlight, are stated in the Bible to result from divine supervision of the material world. It is perhaps hard to understand how believers in this divine supervision could have thought that Providence had allowed men to drift into so dismal a condition, such a spiritual "reign of terror"; but the very

<sup>1</sup> Buckle's *History of Civilisation*, vol. iii., p. 247.

conception of deity as a stern and avenging monitor prevented inquiry into the bases of belief. Certain it is that, partly from lack of reason, partly as a result of the theory that the whole Bible was divinely inspired, these grim views of religion were held by faith to be true, and reason was not allowed to call them in question. The Bible had to be accepted without hesitation as the infallible oracle of God, or woe betide the unlucky sceptic. Such theories are no longer held, and the world has gained immensely by their abandonment. But the mere fact that it has taken the Bible-reading races 2,000 years to evolve an ethical theory of a supreme being is sufficient evidence that the improvement cannot be due to the influence of the Bible itself. It has only been in proportion as scepticism has modified faith, as reason has dared to question the alleged divine authority, that this improvement—not merely secular improvement, be it understood, but the actual purifying of spiritual conceptions—has been effected.

Most sincerely religious persons of the present day will admit that a genuine love of truth is one of the principal ties by which society is held together. Apart from its advantages, truth should be loved for its own sake, and followed "in scorn of consequence." This implies an openness of mind which is inconsistent with faith. Faith closes the mind to all avenues of truth but one, and assumes that by that one alone is all truth to be found. But speculative truth demands the most single-minded devotion. Truth it is pre-eminently the province of the reason to search for and discern. What, for instance, can be more fatal to the habit of consistent truth-seeking than that the inquirer should deliberately give up

the exercise of the very faculties by which alone truth is to be discovered? Yet it is to this abnegation of the individual reason that every person received into the Roman Catholic Church pledges himself. He undertakes to accept the infallibility of the Church and of the Pope in all matters appertaining to faith and morals, departments in which the aid of the individual judgment is emphatically needed. It is a strange way of beginning the quest for religious truth to accept an authority which precludes further investigation. When reason has once been deliberately abandoned the rest of the way is easy. Statements are accepted as divine truths which to the unfettered intellect are no more than human follies. The fatal habit of paltering with truth has been practised to a very serious extent in the Christian Church, and notably in ages when faith has been the dominant force. Gibbon says that "The gravest of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius himself, indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace, of religion." No doubt the principle was extensively acted upon, for as soon as Christianity became powerful it assiduously destroyed the writings of its adversaries. Mr. Lecky has said:—

The Fathers laid down a distinct proposition that pious frauds were justifiable and even laudable, and if they had not laid this down they would nevertheless have practised them as a necessary consequence of their doctrine of exclusive salvation. Immediately all ecclesiastical literature became tainted with a spirit of the most unblushing mendacity. Heathenism was to be combated, and therefore prophecies of Christ by Orpheus and the Sibyls were forged; lying wonders were multiplied; and ceaseless calumnies poured upon those who, like Julian, opposed the faith. Heretics were to be convinced, and therefore interpolations of old writings or complete forgeries were habitually

opposed to the forged Gospels. The veneration of relics and the monastic system were introduced, and therefore innumerable miracles were attributed to the bones of saints or to the prayers of hermits, and were solemnly asserted by the most eminent of the Fathers.

Generation after generation this tendency became more universal :—

It continued till the very sense of truth and the very love of truth seemed blotted out from the minds of men. Not only did the priests and monks pursue with the grossest calumny every enemy to their faith, not only did they encircle every saint with a halo of palpable fiction, not only did they invent tens of thousands of miracles for the purpose of stimulating devotion; they also very naturally carried into all other subjects the indifference to truth they had acquired in theology. All their writings, and more especially their histories, became tissues of the wildest fables, so grotesque and at the same time so audacious that they were the wonder of succeeding ages. And the very men who scattered these fictions broadcast over Christendom taught at the same time that credulity was a virtue and scepticism a crime. As long as the doctrine of exclusive salvation was believed and realised, it was necessary for the peace of mankind that they should be absolutely certain of the truth of what they believed; in order to be so certain it was necessary to suppress adverse arguments; and in order to effect this object it was necessary that there should be no critical or sceptical spirit in Europe. A habit of boundless credulity was therefore a natural consequence of the doctrine of exclusive salvation; and not only did this habit naturally produce a luxuriant crop of falsehood, it was itself the negation of the spirit of truth.<sup>1</sup>

It is no wonder that "Christian veracity" came to be ranked with "Punic faith." It is simply impossible for anyone to form an accurate estimate of the suffering, the wrong, the cruelty, to which this exaltation of faith has given rise. In general terms we may confidently say that it retarded the normal progress of the human race for many hundreds of years, and has, therefore, been one of the greatest of its calamities. It is notorious that in a great variety

<sup>1</sup> *History of Rationalism*, vol. i., pp. 396-398.

of ways, direct and indirect, Romanism has fostered the grossest superstition. During medieval times a preposterous value was set upon holy shrines and relics :—

There were several abbeys that possessed our Saviour's crown of thorns. Eleven had the lance that pierced his side. If any person was adventurous enough to suggest that these could not all be authentic, he would have been denounced as an atheist. During the holy wars the Templar-Knights had driven a profitable commerce by bringing from Jerusalem to the crusading armies bottles of the milk of the Blessed Virgin, which they sold for enormous sums; these bottles were preserved with pious care in many of the great religious establishments. But perhaps none of these impostures surpassed in audacity that offered by a monastery in Jerusalem, which presented to the beholder one of the fingers of the Holy Ghost !<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the closeness of the relationship between faith and superstition, the most eminent of English Romanists has used expressions which cannot but be reprobated. A passage from the *Via Media* of Cardinal Newman, quoted in the *Contemporary Review* for November, 1877, runs thus: "Taking human nature as it is, we may surely concede a little superstition as not the worst of evils if it be the price of making sure of faith." That men should be constrained to be superstitious if their faith is to be preserved implies that there is no essential difference between the two, which is practically the contention of all reasonable men. If superstition is not the worst of evils, it is certainly one of the worst, because it can impose no limit to the mischiefs resulting from the ignorance which it is unable to remove. The conveniently charitable manner in which the Romanist regards the failings of his own communion is indicated by Newman's admission that the Church,

<sup>1</sup> Draper's *Conflict*, p. 270.

though presenting "an admirable consistency and unity," is yet "crossed and discredited now and then by apparent anomalies, which need, and which claim at our hands, an exercise of faith." If there are any anomalies in this world which are real and not apparent, no better instances could be selected than those afforded by the contrast between the Church's divine claims and her actual methods.

The usages of the Romish Church have doubtless been instituted from good motives. Experience, however, has shown many of them to be morally objectionable. The celibacy of the priesthood was based on the expressions in which St. Paul recommends the unmarried, rather than the married, state as more favourable to a devout life. But to make that which suits exceptional persons into a law binding on the average person must always incur the risk of abuse. History shows that moral evil from this cause has been very widespread. After an examination of the works of the ascetic writers—the nature of the evidence being "unfit for publication"—the Rev. Isaac Taylor says that the general results of his inquiries may be stated as follows :—

(1) That the monastic vow and the life of celibacy failed to secure the professed object of the institution in all but a very few instances, and that it did not promote that purity of the heart which was acknowledged to be its only good end. (2) That, besides the evil of cutting men off from the common enjoyments, duties, and sympathies of life, the work of maintaining and defending their chastity absorbed almost the whole energies of those who sincerely laboured at it, so that to be chaste in fact and in heart was pretty nearly the sum of what the monk could do, even with the aid of starvation, excessive bodily toils, and depletic medicine, to say nothing of his prayers, tears, and flagellations. (3) That the monastic institution, even during its earlier era, entailed the most deplorable miseries, and generated the foulest and most abominable practices, so that for

every veritable saint which the monastery cherished it made twenty wretches whose moral condition was in the last degree pitiable or loathsome.<sup>1</sup>

Celibacy was one of the great means which the Christian Church adopted for the promotion of religious faith and the glory of God.

The system of Indulgences instituted by Pope Leo in the early part of the sixteenth century was one of the methods by which the money required for building St. Peter's was obtained. Faith must indeed have been strong and reason weak when the offender believed that he could receive the divine pardon for murder on payment of eight ducats, or for polygamy by handing six ducats to a priest, a trifle of two ducats for witchcraft, while perjury and sacrilege demanded nine. Tetzel's Indulgences purported, for a small payment in cash, to "remit the punishment thou shouldest have had to endure in purgatory; I make thee anew a participator in the sacraments of the Church; I incorporate thee afresh in the communion of the saints; and I reinstate thee in the innocence and purity in which thou wast at the hour of thy baptism; so that, at the hour of thy death, the gate through which is the entrance to the place of torments and punishments shall be closed against thee, and that which leads to the Paradise of joy shall be open."<sup>2</sup> He even asserted that souls soared out of Purgatory the moment the money chinked at the bottom of his strong box. How is that calculated to affect the morals of a semi-civilised people? The system was a direct outcome of Christian faith; but

<sup>1</sup> *Fanaticism*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>2</sup> D'Aubigné, *History of Reformation*, vol. i., p. 247.



it can only be termed a reversion to barbarism. Not only was its immediate effect bad, but the indirect effect in lowering the moral standard generally can hardly be over-estimated. Precisely these results did happen: the common people claimed that no moral amendment was necessary; that they were exempt from the punishment of their sins; and the consequence was a visible moral taint wherever the Indulgence-monger had carried on his traffic. Luther, when a priest, was once astounded to find that his penitents, though glad enough to obtain pardon, had no desire whatever to give up their sins, and they produced their Indulgences as proof that they were already forgiven!

Against the practice of confession strong objections may also be urged on ethical grounds. To the individual penitent the comfort gained by avowal of sinful thoughts and actions is probably more than counteracted by the debasement of nature caused by easy absolution. Many people are ready enough to sin if they think they can escape the penalty. And the effect of such easy remission is mischievous in proportion to the ignorance, and consequently the faith, of the suppliant. Is repentance likely to be genuine when the Church deliberately makes a farce of it? It is on the priest, however, that the effect of the frequent recital of shameful things must be most depraving. In times of lax morality the priest has often proved himself no better than the penitent, but has greatly abused his privileges as a spiritual guide. Human nature cannot bear more than a certain strain, and the Romish Church seems to have tried her servants to the utmost when she insisted on their knowing not merely the facts of guilt, but the most

circumstantial details. The confessional-box became a common sewer, through which flowed the stream of human pollution.

In one's childhood the Crusades appear to have been very glorious undertakings, only remarkable because of their strange want of success. When we have put away childish things, sober reason tells us that these wars were among the crankiest exhibitions of human folly. It is impossible for us to realise the frenzy of faith which led to them, fanned as it was to a flame of red-hot enthusiasm by the exhortations of the Church. What must have been the state of the public mind when a vast horde of poor fanatical children were led across half Europe in the mad design of wresting the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the infidels! As ignorant as they were enthusiastic and helpless, these misguided urchins form a sad picture of the lunacy of the current religious ideas. As, thousands of them dying by the wayside, they straggled slowly along, inquiring as they came in sight of each new town whether they beheld the towers of the holy city.

The extent to which faith, when it is the spirit of the age, dominates the minds of even its ablest advocates is illustrated by an incident in the life of St. Jerome. It had been found that the nocturnal festivals and vigils of the Church had furnished the occasion of scandalous irregularities, and proposals were made that they should be discontinued. The eloquent Jerome raised a storm of protest against the daring suggestion. So venerable a custom, sanctioned by the Church and approved by many Popes, must be good, and must therefore be maintained. Strange that the most eminent ascetic of his time should

support a custom which had come to be a danger to public morals!

Jerome is a mild instance. Crimes committed as the direct result of piety untempered by reason are surprisingly numerous in the pages of history. A strange example of the power of faith to bias morals is afforded by the words of a man who had taken a leading part in the massacre of St. Bartholomew, and who on his deathbed confessed his sins without mentioning that trifling incident. When it was recalled to his attention he replied: "Why, for that God ought to be obliged to me!"

Lecky relates how the intensity of faith of the early Christians led them to eagerly anticipate the pleasures of being cruelly tortured and put to death. On one occasion an entire town implored the Roman proconsul to carry out the stern decrees of the Emperor, and grant them the privilege of martyrdom. An epidemic of this sort occasionally broke out, which the authorities of the Church could with difficulty restrain. St. Perpetua, callously indifferent to family ties in her desire for martyrdom, is a less admirable spectacle to the rational thinker than to the ecclesiastic. One may admire the fortitude born of the martyr's faith without admitting that it was philosophically justifiable. Gibbon relates that the Donatists manifested so great a frenzy that "they frequently stopped travellers on the public highways and obliged them to inflict the stroke of martyrdom by the promise of a reward, and by the threat of instant death if they refused to grant so very singular a favour. When they were disappointed of every other resource, they announced the day on which, in the presence of their friends and brethren, they

should cast themselves headlong from some lofty rock; and many precipices were shown which had acquired fame by the number of religious suicides."<sup>1</sup>

Unhappily for the human race, insanity due to morbid views of religion is far from being extinct. Cases are at frequent intervals reported in the newspapers which reveal the existence of unreasoning faith in the terrific dogmas of orthodoxy. These dogmas are accepted as true, the mind broods upon them, till it becomes thoroughly morbid, applies to itself each threatening text, rejects every hopeful word, and becomes convinced that its guilt is unpardonable, and that the soul is lost for ever. In this state of despair the voice of reason is unheeded, all consolation is vain, and suicide is frequently the religio-maniac's last refuge. The poet Cowper was for long in this condition, and it may truly be said that the religious faith which drove him to madness cannot have been to him a source of happiness. Probably few minds would derive comfort from orthodox beliefs if they fully realised the tremendous dogma of hell. Investigation of this subject of religious mania belongs chiefly to the sphere of the mental pathologist; it is mentioned here as an illustration of the danger of a faith which enounces doctrines that reason abhors. The strange idea of an unpardonable sin has been the source of infinite misery. And the curious uncertainty as to its nature becomes comical when we learn that some fanatics have discovered this mysterious offence to lie in smoking! A rational theism must surely reject with horror the notion that any sin of human beings

<sup>1</sup> *Decline and Fall*, chap. xxi.

can possibly be beyond the reach of divine mercy. But we must bear in mind that rational theism has been a startling exception to religious beliefs in general, and that its consolations have been attainable only by the few. And, whatever this mysterious sin may be, it is absolutely without definition in the Bible. Jesus is represented to have said that there was a sin which could never be forgiven, yet he neglected to state what it was, leaving the terror-stricken sinners of future generations to the agonies of uncertainty and fruitless remorse, though he is assumed to have known beforehand all the frightful consequences which would ensue. As long as orthodox Christianity gives rise to such religious phenomena, the Rationalist cannot but wonder at the folly which accepts absurdities by faith, and banishes the reason which would dispel them.

## CHAPTER V.

### SOME FRUITS OF FAITH

THE extent to which erroneous religious ideas have influenced human conduct is little realised in an age when they have been shorn of much of their power for mischief. It is to the operation of faith when unchecked by reason that we must look for the truest revelation of its nature ; we have to see what were its results when left to itself. It is less profitable to analyse faith in times when its conclusions are so modified by the growth of knowledge that they are no longer able to dominate the whole of life.

The history of the Christian Church is an astonishing commentary on its claims and professions. It expressly claims to be a divinely-established institution, with a distinct promise that constant divine guidance would be vouchsafed to it. Yet, whether in voluntary societies or in its official hierarchy, we find, especially in times of great religious excitement, extraordinary folly united to extraordinary dogmatism. Recall the hackneyed case of Galileo. The Church declared with the most positive authority that Galileo was not merely wrong in his scientific conclusion that the world went round the sun, but that he was impious and atheistic in thus contradicting the plain teaching of Holy Scripture. And there is something to be said for the Church if its theory of Biblical inspiration is true. The system of Copernicus, the

basis of modern astronomy, was in like manner condemned by the Inquisition as being utterly opposed to the Bible. Thus faith stultified itself by meddling with what it did not understand.

Whether the New World would have been discovered if faith had never been disregarded may be doubtful; certain it is that Columbus met with the utmost opposition in carrying out his plans, which were explicitly condemned by a Council held at Salamanca as being contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and therefore dangerous to religious faith. The heresy of Bruno, which was mainly that there are more worlds than one (a favourite theory of the Christian philosopher, Sir David Brewster), was considered specially inimical to the "plan of salvation," and was silenced not by argument, but by the faggot. As Dr. Draper prophesied, a statue to Bruno's memory has been erected almost on the spot where he was burnt alive 300 years ago.

When we consider the absurd and baseless theologies which have been not only blindly accepted by faith, but insisted upon as the standard of right thinking and the test of social respectability, we shall not form a high idea of the value of faith when determining matters pertaining to reason. That belief is mainly beyond the control of the will, and that it should follow the evidence as far as it can, are principles which simply never occurred to men in the dreary ages when faith was supreme. The leading tenets of the Roman Catholic Church, the product of these ages of ignorance, are, *if true*, of incalculable importance to every human being. It is impossible to deny that, judged by that reason which is our only guide to truth, they are hopelessly false. Yet these doctrines,

unsupported by a shred of evidence worthy of the name, are avowedly inculcated as truths, and truths attainable not by the exercise of reason, but by the exercise of faith, an inferior degree of reason; and of religious faith uncontrolled by judgment they are the natural and logical outcome. Surely the mischief done by these doctrines, in the stunting of mental growth and in obscuring the bright vision of truth, must be very great, particularly among the uneducated, who cannot perceive their futility, and who in addition are expressly discouraged from using their reasoning faculties. Theological dogmas restrict the moral sympathy which should exist between man and man as seriously as they retard intellectual development. And the injury is intensified a hundred-fold by such dogmas being held, not as matters of opinion, but as the final word of God. If it were true that in religion the reason has no right to intrude, it would follow that the truest faith is that which is most unenlightened, for the farther we got away from reason the more brightly would shine the lamp of truth. Such a claim perpetuates the evil which it causes, for the exaltation of faith creates a habit that discountenances all forms of inquiry, whether in things sacred or things secular, and ends in sheer mental laziness and stagnation of thought.

How often has the desire to preserve faith led to the commission of acts which both reason and morals must sternly condemn. When in 755 Rome was in danger of attack from the Lombards, Pope Stephen implored the aid of Pepin, King of France, and other rulers. Help not being promptly forthcoming, he resorted to a forgery of the most daring kind. He wrote a letter purporting to be indited and signed by



the Apostle Peter himself, and imploring assistance in terms of almost hysterical feeling. Faith swallowed the impious forgery, reason dared not question it, and the ruse was eminently successful. A gift from the triumphant Pepin of twenty-one towns and districts rewarded the pontifical ingenuity, and converted a spiritual into a temporal sovereignty. "Thus the successor, as he was declared, of the fisherman of the Galilean lake, the apostle of him whose kingdom was not of this world, became a temporal sovereign. By the gift of a foreign potentate this large part of Italy became the kingdom of the Bishop of Rome."<sup>1</sup> This was the origin of that secular authority which the Papacy wielded for more than 1,000 years—an origin founded on distinct and impudent fraud. At a later date another forgery of a far more elaborate character was perpetrated by ecclesiastics, and sanctioned by papal practice. In the ninth century the Church made great efforts to advance its power and authority. Faith was waning, and needed to be restored; reforms, cash, and credit were all urgently required. Accordingly, between 840 and 847, there appeared the notorious False Decretals, which purport to be letters written by the Roman Pontiffs previously to the fourth century, plainly asserting the supremacy of the Pope, and comprehending the entire ecclesiastical system, with laws on almost every subject, sometimes pervaded by a good moral tone, but throughout subordinating everything to the authority of the Church. But for the monstrous ignorance of history which rendered detection easy, they might have been received as genuine chronicles till now. The immediate result

<sup>1</sup> Milman's *History of Latin Christianity*, book iv., chap. xi.

was an immense increase of papal power, and the transformation of the popular element into an almost absolute monarchy. The Romish Church herself has given up the genuineness of these Decretals, and cannot do more than palliate the guilt of the forger. Instead of manifesting a just indignation at what he must have known to be a barefaced forgery, the Pope deliberately vindicated the authenticity of this interesting document, while the most sophistical reasons were given to account for the admitted absence of the letters from the city archives, and the fraud was also sanctioned by subsequent pontiffs. Perhaps the most important point to notice is that these False Decretals established the whole legislative power of the Papacy; each one became a canon of the Church, and future Bulls rested on their authority.<sup>1</sup> In addition the False Decretals embodied an earlier fiction known as the "Donation of Constantine," under which it was claimed and piously believed that the Emperor had conveyed to the Pope the temporal sovereignty of Italy and the west of Europe. In the twelfth century a further forgery, called the "Decretum of Gratian," made the whole Christian world the domain of the Romish clergy. It inculcated that "it is lawful to constrain men to goodness, to torture and execute heretics, and to confiscate their property; that to kill an excommunicated person is not murder; that the pope, in his unlimited superiority to all law, stands on an equality with the Son of God!"<sup>2</sup> Very fitly has the darkest period of European history been called the Age of Faith.

<sup>1</sup> Milman, book v., chap. iv.

<sup>2</sup> Draper's *Conflict between Religion and Science*, p. 273.

If we wish to see the effects upon a nation at large when faith is predominant and reason is crushed, we cannot do better than study the brilliant chapters in Buckle's *History of Civilisation*, which treat of the condition of the human mind in Spain, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Spain, though religious enthusiasm largely aided in the promotion of her glory, fell from her high estate mainly through the unchecked operation of a faith which had become crystallised into a degree of bigotry, credulity, and ignorance, which it is not easy to credit and impossible to realise. A petition of the Cortes made in 1626 against ecclesiastical encroachments states that there were then in Spain over 9,000 monasteries, while there were 32,000 chaplains in the two dioceses of Seville and Calahorra alone. The clergy engrossed the wealth of the country, discouraged secular learning and the pursuit of trade and commerce, suppressed individual liberty, both of thought and person, held the national intellect in the vice-like grip of the Inquisition, and in fact so retarded the growth of civilisation that Spain became in a comparatively short time literally ruined, feeble, foolish, and bankrupt, inhabited by a poverty-stricken, ignorant, and incapable people. The national follies and crimes committed by that unhappy country under the control of the clergy are almost incredible. She banished the Moors, who formed the most industrious, and, in some respects, the most valuable, part of her population, under circumstances of shocking barbarity, and for reasons almost purely theological and so childishly silly that one is tempted to doubt whether the contrivers of the scheme were sane men or lunatics. So besotted were the king and his ministers that they

thought this act would redound to their credit and glory. They deliberately preferred that the prosperity of the country should be crippled rather than that the purity of the faith should be sullied by the presence of the infidels, while a powerful party in the Church, headed by the Archbishop of Toledo, desired that the work should be still more effectually done by cutting the throats of all the Moriscoes in Spain !

The national reluctance to countenance anything inimical to their intensely narrow religious faith rendered the Spaniards so hostile to all advances in knowledge that, even when the facts of science were established on a sound basis of inductive reasoning, they were deliberately rejected on the ground of their being novel and anti-scriptural. Extreme conservatism in religion led to extreme conservatism in social and political life ; through the decay of public spirit the Spanish people lost the liberties they had once enjoyed, and drifted into an apathy so profound, an ignorance so dense, that the knowledge of both speculative and practical science was lost, and even the fine arts fell into decay. During a great part of the eighteenth century the people of Spain were in a state of starvation ; the army was in rags ; the knowledge of shipbuilding was lost ; and when ships were built by foreign workmen Spanish sailors could not be found to man them. The proper methods of working the rich mines were unknown, even the apothecaries did not know how to mix the drugs they sold, and the court itself was reduced to such straits that supplies of food had sometimes to be collected by force. Other causes must have contributed to this extraordinary state of things in one of the most richly-endowed nations of Europe ; but undoubtedly

the chief and original cause was the singularly narrow and bigoted faith of the people. No other country can exhibit on so large a scale the pernicious effects of religious faith divorced from reason. For faith it was, beyond doubt; and, when we consider that its evil results must have been patent to the people who held it, we cannot well doubt its sincerity, however strongly its narrow and intolerant spirit may be condemned by the broader and more intelligent Christians of our own day. There is indeed something sublime about the idiocy of a whole nation which prefers bankruptcy to any diminution of faith.

The atrocities committed in past ages by the various forms of Christianity which claimed to be orthodox must appear to a sincere and enlightened believer very extraordinary, if not unaccountable. They were, however, the inevitable result of an imperfect religion acting on an imperfect environment. There is so little reason to doubt the sincerity or the ability of many religious persecutors that it is only fair to assume concern for faith as their dominating motive.

Was it not, however, their reason rather than their faith which was at fault? The obvious answer is that, while they must have used their reason, its free and efficient exercise was prevented by its being employed simply as a prop to faith, and so being committed to foregone conclusions. Persecution springs from faith in a creed so strong that it is assumed to be necessarily and eternally true, its falsehood is inconceivable, and the conviction is consequently backed by the whole force of the emotions. Being true, it is necessary that this faith should be shared by all, and if temporary suffering can ensure

salvation from an everlasting hell the enforcement of truth becomes a religious duty. The error lies in the absurd initial assumption, born of a union of egotism and ignorance, that man knows all truth—an error countenanced by the express teaching of the Bible. In the third chapter of his *History of European Morals* Mr. Lecky shows that persecutions by Christians have been “in the overwhelming majority of cases simply the natural, legitimate, and inevitable consequence of a certain portion of the received theology. That portion is the doctrine that correct theological opinions are essential to salvation, and that theological error necessarily involves guilt. To these two opinions may be distinctly traced almost all the sufferings that Christian persecutors have caused, almost all the obstructions they have thrown in the path of human progress; and those sufferings have been so grievous that it may be reasonably questioned whether superstition has not proved a greater curse than vice.....It can be shown that these principles would naturally lead men to persecute. It can be shown that, from the time of Constantine to the time when the rationalistic spirit wrested the bloodstained sword from the priestly hand, persecution was uniformly defended upon them; defended in long, learned, and elaborate treatises by the best and greatest men the Church had produced, by sects that differed on almost all other points, by multitudes who proved in every conceivable manner the purity of their zeal. It can be shown, too, that toleration began with the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, expanded in exact proportion to the growing latitudinarianism, and triumphed only when indifference to dogma had become

prevailing sentiment among legislators." There can be no stronger proof of the value of the rationalistic spirit than that it has made the world a fit abode for rational beings. Mr. Lecky adds: "Few persons, I think, can follow the history of Christian persecution without a feeling of extreme astonishment that some modern writers, not content with maintaining that the doctrine of exclusive salvation *ought* not to have produced persecution, have ventured, in defiance of the unanimous testimony of the theologians of so many centuries, to dispute the plain historical fact that it *did* produce it." Mr. Lecky, however, need not have been astonished. He should have known the Christian controversialist too well.

During the sixteenth century the appalling punishment of death by fire was many times inflicted for trifling divergencies of religious opinion. One can understand that in times of religious excitement unbelievers would be looked upon as wicked and dangerous characters. But in those days the genuine unbeliever was almost unknown; the terms "infidel," "heretic," and "atheist" were freely bestowed on people who accepted all the leading doctrines of the Christian faith, but on some comparatively unimportant point diverged from the standard of orthodoxy. This is how brotherly love continued in the sixteenth century of the Christian era; this is how the union was maintained between the vine and the branches. It was a capital offence for a layman to read the Scriptures which announced his hope of salvation. Motley relates that in 1562 the Inquisitor Titelmann broke into a house, seized no less than twelve persons, and had them all immediately burnt—for reading the Bible and praying within their own doors. It was a

capital offence not to bow down before the Host. A poor huckster at Bergen-op-Zoom who neglected to prostrate himself when the wafer was carried by was immediately burned. It was a capital offence to reject the doctrine that the sacred wafer became the actual body and blood of Christ. Bertrand le Blas, for the incredible crime of trampling the wafer underfoot, was done to death with the most fiendish cruelty. After being tortured his right hand and foot were twisted off with red-hot irons, his tongue was torn out by the roots, his arms and legs were fastened together behind his back, and he was then hooked to an iron chain, and swung slowly backwards and forwards over a slow fire until he was entirely roasted.<sup>1</sup> In this ghastly record gleams of light appear at intervals. Cardinal Granvelle, a violent persecutor, reports with some astonishment to Philip of Spain that the Marquis Berghen, Governor of Valenciennes, disapproved of the holy work. "The Marquis says openly that 'tis not right to shed blood for matters of faith."<sup>2</sup> But in this curious opinion the Marquis stood almost alone.

It has been calculated that the Emperor Charles V. caused 50,000 persons to be put to death in the Netherlands alone for matters of religious belief, while this number was far exceeded by his son Philip. When that cruel and bigoted monarch went to Spain to assume the crown, the most fitting way in which the representatives of the religion of Christ could welcome him was a public and solemn religious ceremony. And of what nature was this religious ceremony? It was called an "Act of Faith," a

<sup>1</sup> Motley's *Dutch Republic*, chap. iii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



public exhibition of the chief Christian virtue, an act by which the men of faith manifested to the world how they thought proper to treat men of no faith, or less faith and more reason. It was the burning alive of men who had dared to protest against the corruptions of the Church, and to embrace the Protestant form of religion because they thought it nearer to that of Jesus. This awful cruelty was perpetrated again and again less than three hundred years ago in the name of Christ, and by those who claimed to be his direct representatives and ministers. It will be said that this was a false and unworthy faith. So it was, but it was the faith of the Christian Church, and it was the logical result of the principles of the Church, which allowed one form of belief to be divine and one alone. The persecutors believed that salvation depended, not on a good life—many of the reformers were men of intense piety and holy character—but on correct belief. This correct belief meant thinking as the persecutors themselves thought, and that on subjects of which nobody knew anything whatever, and on which experience has proved the persecutors to be wrong. The persecutors did not recognise that in matters of the intellect the intellect itself is the best guide men have to truth; that in the realm of thought reason is king. They ought to have done so, for their system of religion was almost purely intellectual; there was very little morality or spirituality about it. Had reason been allowed free exercise, how much of this shocking and unavailing cruelty, this wild and monstrous injustice, this bitter agony of burning flesh and broken limbs, would have been avoided, and the very blackest page of history left unwritten. Such was the way in which the

kingdom of Christ was extended, and souls gathered into the human harvest. We think little about religious persecution in these times, but three hundred years ago it was a frightful reality.

It is difficult to estimate the number of the victims of the Inquisition, but Llorente, who wrote the history of that tribunal, and placed it in as favourable a light as possible, calculated that in Spain alone it had caused 32,000 people to be put to death during its whole career, besides inflicting nearly ten times that number of other punishments. This was in a country where the natural bigotry of the people left heresy a very poor chance. Had mental freedom made greater headway, there would have been more burnings and slaughters. How many thousands perished in other countries, notably in Holland and the Spanish colonies, no one will ever know. The Spaniards themselves were so enamoured of this Board of Blood, this horrible Society for the Promotion of Murder as a Fine Art, that even in the nineteenth century, after the Inquisition had been suppressed for six years, the king Ferdinand VII. and his ministers were able to restore it, and the final abolition did not take place until 1820.

In France the Inquisition never gained a really firm foothold, and was formally abolished by the Edict of Nantes in 1598; even when that wisely tolerant measure was revoked the tribunal was not re-established. The reactionary policy of Louis XIV. had, however, the effect of banishing from France vast numbers of her most skilful workmen and artisans, solely on account of their religious opinions, and her commercial rival, England, reaped a corresponding benefit. But no European country, certainly

not France, is free from the stain of blood-guiltiness in religion. A few years before the Edict of Nantes was issued by the sceptical Henry IV., the dreadful massacre of St. Bartholomew took place, when many thousands of persons—men, women, and children—were butchered for daring to hold Protestant opinions. And this monstrous wickedness was solemnly blessed by the Pope, Gregory XIII., who celebrated by a solemn jubilee an event which so highly redounded to the glory of God. The murder of Henry IV. by Ravallac was directly and repeatedly instigated by fanatical Catholic preachers.

Even in this country, where religious freedom has perhaps been more complete than in any other, the lurid glare of the fires of Smithfield lights up the darker pages of the national history, and the persecuting spirit displayed by both Catholics and Protestants is a mournful thing to contemplate. And, although the twentieth century has dawned, we still meet with instances of bigotry, though on a petty scale, which make one wonder whether the dogmatists of the present would not have been persecutors had they lived in times which favoured instead of discouraging the sentiment of intolerance.

Comparatively few persons appear to have been put to death in Germany for the cause of religion since the burning of John Huss and Jerome of Prague early in the fifteenth century, and these acts the German people had spirit enough to resent by an insurrection. The Thirty Years' War, however, was waged almost solely from religious considerations, and caused an incalculable amount of needless misery.

The prominent part taken by John Calvin in the burning of Michael Servetus for denying the doctrine

of the Trinity is one of the gravest crimes committed by Protestantism. One great reason why the principles of the Reformation were not carried to their logical conclusion was that the Reformers were afraid of allowing the reason anything like free scope in the investigation of religious beliefs. Protestantism could not escape from the prevailing spirit of the times in which it arose, but this spirit was not ripe for toleration all round; still less was it ripe for individual liberty. Attempts were made in this direction, but were defeated by the fanatical excesses of their contrivers. Protestants have too often manifested a spirit bitterly intolerant of further deviations from Roman orthodoxy than the precise point at which they themselves have seen fit to stop. The Reformers made one important step in the direction of mental freedom, and then became alarmed at the prospect of further advance. The cruelties committed against them certainly justified much of their violence in controversy. Even now Protestantism exhibits a tendency to reserve its vials of wrath, not for the semi-pagan doctrine and ritual of the Romish Church, but for further progress along the plane of rational thought. Any belief which regards itself as fixed and final must, of necessity, find itself in an invidious position whenever it conflicts with the ever-advancing stream of human knowledge, and in proportion as it is vivid and earnest, in proportion as it believes itself to be in full possession of the truth, and is anxious that others should share it, does it become intolerant. Orthodoxy should, therefore, on its own principles, be more coercive than it is in the present day. It dares not carry into effect its claim that it holds the truth, and that all variations from its standard are forms of

error. In an intellectual sense modern Protestantism holds a dubious and half-hearted attitude; socially, it is for the most part a cowardly concession to Mrs. Grundy. There is considerable force in Cardinal Newman's argument that there is no satisfactory *via media* between accepting the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in matters of faith and holding the negative conclusions of scepticism. But the faith which admits the pretensions of the Papal communion to infallibility is itself a weak and pitiful exhibition of human credulity. The object of a thinking being is to think. To let another do our thinking, and imagine that we shall so attain truth, is to relinquish the priceless possession of individual liberty; it is to place our minds in a permanent house of bondage; it is the suicide of reason. History shows with the greatest clearness that the extravagant pretensions of the Church have not preserved her from either intellectual error or moral guilt. Her claim to infallible knowledge must then be false. Scepticism in regard to her demands is thus not merely justifiable, but right, necessary, and healthy. Religious persecution was an open and avowed attempt to crush out human thought, to prevent the use by a man of his own faculties; in a word, to enfeeble and mutilate our common humanity. The very excesses of the ecclesiastical system must have tended to defeat its object, by arousing strong suspicion of flaws in the ecclesiastical title. The scepticism which thought, questioned, and finally rebelled, put the necessary drag on the wheels of the ecclesiastical Juggernaut, and results have shown that the Church has rightly been curtailed of the power which she knew not how to utilise.

## CHAPTER VI.

### OF HERESIES, DIVISIONS, AND OTHER MATTERS

THAT faith has a strong tendency to superstition cannot be doubted when we contemplate the long array of follies, errors, and crimes which it has either directly instigated or failed to prevent. The subject of the forms which popular superstition has taken is too wide to be entered upon here, and the present chapter will therefore merely give an outline of a few of the more pronounced ways in which the spirit of credulity has manifested itself as a direct result of the conscious acceptance of religious doctrines held to be infallibly true. The facts presented will probably be thought sufficient to justify the conclusion that the bitter sectarianism which springs from uncultured faith is an anti-social force, and consequently prejudicial to the welfare of humanity.

In the early ages of the Reformation the sect known as the Anabaptists made their appearance in Germany. In addition to their leading principle that adults only should receive the sacrament of baptism, they maintained that all worldly possessions should be held in common, that offices of civil authority were encroachments on their spiritual liberty, and that no restriction should be placed on the number of wives a man might marry. These doctrinal eccentricities soon led to the most serious moral excesses. On one cold February night in Amsterdam some Anabaptists, seven men

and five women, threw off their clothes, and rushed naked into the streets, raving about the wrath of God—an extravagance which brought the poor wretches to summary execution. The Anabaptists took possession of the town of Munster, and re-named it Mount Zion; their leader, John of Leyden, was crowned king, and sat on the throne of David, wearing a golden crown and all the insignia of royalty. He appointed twelve judges in imitation of the rulers of the tribes of Israel. When he went out a Bible was carried on one side and a naked sword on the other. He coined money stamped with his image, and took unto himself no fewer than fourteen wives. The town of Munster was shortly besieged by its bishop, and reduced to the extremities of famine, without, however, shaking the faith of the fanatical majority that God would speedily interpose in their favour. An extraordinary incident is related by Robertson: "One of the king's wives having uttered certain words which implied some doubt concerning his divine mission, he instantly called the whole number together, and, commanding the blasphemer, as he called her, to kneel down, cut off her head with his own hands, and so far were the rest from expressing any horror at this cruel deed that they joined him in dancing with a frantic joy around the bleeding body of their companion."<sup>1</sup> After a time reverses came, Munster was captured by the bishop, its defenders massacred, and John of Leyden was torn to death by red-hot pincers.

In the earlier half of the eighteenth century Paris was the scene of some remarkable exhibitions of hysterical religion. On the death of a Jansenist

<sup>1</sup> *Charles V.*, book v.

deacon, eminent for his piety, an extraordinary outbreak took place. Miracles were reported to have been wrought at his tomb, and were expressly sworn to by affidavits duly attested. Prophecies were frequent, and the sense of the vileness of the body became so keen that it developed into a mania, and terrible sufferings were voluntarily inflicted. Several women were crucified, some for as long a time as three hours at a stretch, with nails five inches in length driven through their hands and feet. In this strange effort to share the sufferings of Jesus one woman was crucified twenty-one times. A girl received one hundred blows on the stomach with a heavy bludgeon, crying out—*not with pain, but with joy!* After a period of about five years repeated punishments appear to have put an end to a madness which, it must be confessed, there is little in the tenets of Christianity to encourage. The cemetery in which the deceased had been interred was closed, and the following ribald epigram was posted up on the gates, evidently by a wit who did not share the prevalent enthusiasm:—

"De par le Roi—Defense a Dieu  
De faire miracle en ce lieu."

Such extravagances, it may be said, are harmful only to the fanatics who commit them. But the prevalence of religious enthusiasm is by no means necessarily accompanied by any decrease in public crime. Statistics on this subject are not easy to obtain, but here is one illustration. In 1859 there was a great religious revival in Belfast, which it was asserted decreased the number of offences. A writer, however, in Charles Dickens's *All the Year Round* for



that year, stated that, whereas during the four months preceding the revival there were 129 fewer convictions than in the corresponding period of the previous year, there were during the four months following the commencement of the pious outbreak no fewer than 482 convictions in excess of the number for the corresponding period of the year before. It is possible that accidental circumstances may have rendered these figures exceptional; but, unless that can be shown, they are full of significance. Certain it is that many of the hysterical outbursts of the Middle Ages stirred the passions of men to a degree that weakened the intellectual stability which most clearly perceives ethical obligations. Hysteria is an inevitable accompaniment of religious enthusiasm among masses of ignorant persons, and the credulity which sees in it a divine illumination is analogous to the savage belief that insanity is a state in which human beings are most highly favoured by divine influence. It is well known that many eminent religionists, from Mahomet to George Fox and Swedenborg, have possessed strongly-marked tendencies to hysteria, epilepsy, and other forms of psycho-physical derangement.

The Dancing Mania, which began in 1374, originated in the terrorism by which an ignorant faith turned the terrible Black Death to account in the promotion of piety. Assemblies of men and women appeared at Aix-la-Chapelle, and began dancing in the streets, screaming and foaming like persons possessed.

The dancers, losing all control over their movements, continued dancing in wild delirium till they fell in extreme exhaustion, and groaned as in the agonies of death; some dashed out their brains against walls. When dancing they were insensible to external

impressions, but haunted by visions, such as of being immersed in a sea of blood, which obliged them to leap so high, or of seeing the heavens opened and the Saviour enthroned with the Virgin Mary.... Troops of dancers, inflamed by intoxicating music, and followed crowds who caught the mental infection, went from place to place, taking possession of religious houses, and pouring forth imprecations against the priests. The mania spread to Cologne, Metz, and Strasburg, giving rise to many disorders, impostures, and profligacy.<sup>1</sup>

It has been said that so contagious was this form of hysteria that even grave dignitaries of the Church who witnessed its excesses found a difficulty in restraining themselves from taking part in them.

A very striking example of faith flowing in the channel of credulous asceticism is afforded by the body known as the Flagellants, which made its appearance in Italy about the year 1210, and, after being partially suppressed, was twice or thrice revived. It arose from the belief that great calamities and misfortunes are inflicted on the human race by God as a punishment for sin—a fallacy which the uncultivated reason has never been strong enough to contend against, and which has survived in various milder forms to the present day. The following passage is given by Mr. Davenport Adams in his *Curiosities of Superstition* as a quotation from the chronicles of a monk of Padua:—

When all Italy was sullied with crimes of every kind a certain sudden superstition, hitherto unknown to the world, first seized the inhabitants of Perugia, afterwards the Romans, and then almost all the nations of Italy. To such a degree were they affected with the fear of God that noble as well as ignoble persons, young and old, even children five years of age, would go naked about the streets without any sense of shame, walking in public two and two, in the manner of a solemn procession. Every one of them held

<sup>1</sup> Chambers's *Encyclopedia*.

in his hand a scourge made of leather thongs, and with tears and groans they lashed themselves on their backs till the blood ran ; all the while weeping and giving tokens of the same bitter affliction as if they had really been spectators of the passion of our Saviour, imploring the forgiveness of God and His Mother, and praying that He who had been appeased by the repentance of so many sinners would not disdain theirs. And not only in the daytime but likewise during the nights hundreds, thousands, and ten thousands of these penitents ran, notwithstanding the rigour of winter, about the streets, and in churches, with lighted wax candles in their hands, and preceded by priests, who carried crosses and banners along with them, and with humility prostrated themselves before the altars ; the same scenes were to be seen in small towns and villiages ; so that the mountains and fields seemed to resound alike the voice of men who were crying to God.

This religious emotion did not always prove ethically sound ; the Jews were the special objects of the Flagellants' abhorrence, and suffered dreadfully from their fury in Germany and the Netherlands. A troop of these fanatics appeared in Saxony in 1414, and outdid the extravagances of their predecessors. Their leader, Conrad Schmidt, claimed a divine mission, and announced that the blood of flagellation was the true wedding-garment of the Gospel, that it was more precious than the blood of the martyrs, and a sure passport to eternal life. Schmidt and ninety of his followers were burnt alive by the Inquisition. In 1574 Catherine de Medicis assumed the lead of one branch, and a few years later the King of France established a brotherhood in Paris, but in spite of all ridicule and repression the fanaticism did not disappear till the beginning of the seventeenth century. The extravagances of the Flagellants have been reprobated by the Roman Catholic Church, but, as it commends the use of the self-castigation known as the "Discipline," it does not appear that there is any

great difference in principle between its practice and that of the mediæval fanatics.

Modern times have witnessed some strange exhibitions of religious enthusiasm and misdirected faith, and of these the case of Joanna Southcott is not the least interesting. She was born about 1750, was "subject to fits," and in youth joined the Methodists, became infected with religious enthusiasm, and gave out that she possessed the spirit of prophecy. Encouraged by the support she received, partly from clergymen of the Church of England, she declared herself to be the woman driven into the wilderness referred to in the Apocalypse, and issued papers to her followers which she assured them would guarantee their salvation. In 1814 she announced that she would on a given date miraculously become the mother of a second Prince of Peace, and elaborate preparations were made for the event, which, however, did not take place, and a little later Joanna made another mistake and died. Her supporters, however, even then believed she would reappear, and so late as 1851 four congregations still existed in this country professing belief in her divine mission. Many of her supporters were persons of education and position in society, while her humbler followers were to be counted by thousands. Possibly, Joanna Southcott had a most profound and simple-minded belief in her mission, and never suspected her own sanity for a moment. Yet it was all a sorry delusion, and it is probable that on the whole it produced more harm than good.

Another singular body of Christians is that known as the Shakers, also founded by women, Ann Wardlaw and Ann Lee, both poor and ignorant, and the latter, in particular, of violent and hysterical temper. She

believed herself specially animated by the Holy Spirit, that Christ was reigning in her person, and that it was revealed to her that she should lay the foundations of the new spiritual kingdom in America. There she established a community which still exists, though she died as long ago as 1784. It is supposed that she and other leaders of the sect still preside in spirit over, and remain united to, the visible body of believers. The present Shakers are a peaceable and industrious society. Their chief doctrinal peculiarities are that Christ has already returned to earth a second time in the person of "Mother Ann"; that those who join them become dead to the world, and enter upon not merely a changed life but a new order of being, and consequently all earthly relationships are as completely ignored as if terminated by physical death; that angels and spirits are in daily intercourse with them, watching over and guiding their doings; and that the believer is already in heaven, having now been freed from the curse inflicted upon Adam. One great point is the most rigid celibacy; even husbands and wives after joining become no more than other brothers and sisters. A body of Shakers existed only a few years ago in England under the leadership of a Mrs. Girling, but they got into difficulties over such mundane matters as the payment of their rent, and came to an untimely end on the death of their leader.

So late as 1835 a body of enthusiasts arose in Germany popularly known as the "Muckers," whose religious worship appears to have been of a very dubious character. Their leader, Ebel, an archdeacon, had three ladies living in the same house with him. In consequence of accusations of licentiousness, which, however, it is said, were never proved, Ebel and

another clergyman were degraded from their offices and imprisoned. Some of the supporters of the movement were said to have been ladies of high birth, and, whether the charges of immorality were true or not, it is evidence of the weakness of human nature that religious faith should so often take the form of eccentricity in moral conduct.

About the middle of the nineteenth century a great revival of religious zeal occurred in the West and South of England under the guidance of an Anglican clergyman, the Rev. Henry James Prince. He appears to have held so many peculiar tenets that he got into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities, and therefore started a church of his own. Three of his supporters were fortunate enough to marry three handsome and wealthy sisters, who became infected with the same enthusiastic spirit, and the money thus acquired enabled the community to establish a luxuriously-fitted home near Charlynch, in Somersetshire, where they lived as brothers and sisters for many years. Community of goods was one of the leading tenets of this body; another was that the head of the Agapemone, as it was called, was the Lord, and letters were so addressed to him through the post. Mr. Prince regarded himself as the "witness" appointed by Jesus Christ to conclude the day of grace and introduce the Day of Judgment; and, in accordance with this doctrine, disciples were expected to believe that they would see the eternal punishment of those whom they most loved, and rejoice in it as redounding to their master's glory. Brother Prince also considered himself incapable of further progress towards perfection. His death was reported in the newspapers not very long since, but whether the

Agapemone came to an end was not stated. England saw precursors of this sect in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who called themselves the "Family of Love," and originated from German and Dutch Anabaptists. Their doctrines, professing to be a kind of spiritual sentimentalism, resulted in gross impurity.

America is blessed with an extraordinary variety of queer faiths and practices. One prominent sect is known as the "Perfectionists," or "Bible Communists," more generally called the "Free-Lovers," one of their leading ideas being that the ties between the sexes should be perfectly free from legal restraint. In other matters, also, they disavow all law, believing in the equality of all their members, the community of goods, and the sacredness of labour. Some of their doctrines are singularly at variance with the usages of most religious bodies, for, while they place so much reliance on faith as to maintain that nothing else is necessary to salvation, they nevertheless renounce the use of prayer, of all religious services, and the observance of the Sabbath. Married people abjure their vows, and enter into the "complex marriage" which subsists between all the males and all the females of the "family." They possess a flourishing estate at Oneida Creek, and are a fairly prosperous society of harmless enthusiasts. It is fair to add that some of their tenets are modified by the public opinion of the community.

A sect which has attained far greater influence and notoriety is the Church of Latter-Day Saints of Jesus Christ, commonly known as the "Mormons." This body was founded by an illiterate farmer's son named Joseph Smith, who asserted that he was visited by

the angel of the Lord, and informed that he was the chosen instrument to bring about the dispensation of the second coming of Christ—a hare-brained fancy of which some enthusiasts never seem to tire. In 1827 this friendly angel put into Smith's hands some tin plates, on which were engraven certain remarkable records in an unknown tongue, together with a pair of magic spectacles which enabled the prophet to translate them into such English as he had at command. The plates purported to contain the history of the people of America, from the time when it was settled by colonists from the Tower of Babel down to about 400 A.D., when the plates were sealed up and hidden in the earth till in due time the prophet should find and reveal them to mankind. These priceless records, believed by the sect to be of equal value with the Bible, are said to have been exhibited to a few select witnesses, but were carefully hidden from the vulgar, and have never since been forthcoming. The *Book of Mormon* appeared in 1830, and is asserted to be an almost verbatim copy of a MS. romance written by one Solomon Spalding, who had died a few years before; this, however, the Saints contend, is a scandalous fabrication. Among the persecutions he endured, Smith was on one occasion tarred and feathered, but he turned the tables the next day by preaching openly and baptising three converts. In 1835 twelve apostles were sent out, one of them being Brigham Young, who had joined the body three years earlier. In 1838 the Saints moved from Missouri into Illinois, but six years later serious disturbances were raised by the orthodox, in the course of which Smith was shot. Brigham Young, a man of great practical sagacity



and force of character, was elected his successor, and in 1846 the whole body of believers, many thousands in number, marched across the desert and settled in the magnificent valley of the Great Salt Lake, where, in spite of many conflicts and bickerings with the United States Government, they have remained ever since. Brigham Young died in 1877, but his successors continue his missionary policy, and at intervals conduct substantial bodies of converts across the Atlantic from Europe.

The organisation of the Mormons is a pure theocracy, and their doctrines are a singular medley of materialism, mysticism, and common-sense. They believe that God was once a man, and still possesses a physical form, and that man himself, by faith, obedience, and holiness, may rise to be a deity, with the power of making and ruling a world all to himself. They maintain that the miraculous gifts of tongues, healing, and visions have not ceased; they hold the literal resurrection of the body; that the New Jerusalem is established on the American continent; and that the word of God is contained not only in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, but in all good books. They thoroughly believe in hard work, in being honest and true, temperate and virtuous, and in doing good to all men.

In spite of these excellent points of Mormonism, there is no doubt that elements of imposture were largely mingled with it. Both Smith and Brigham Young received "revelations" at the precise time when revelations were convenient for their purposes; while the original "revelation" of the Book of Mormon and the tin-plate record is simply a vulgar fraud. The practice of polygamy also, however

restricted, is a retrograde step, which has done much to discredit the cause. On the whole, one can only regard Mormonism as one of the most curious aberrations of religious faith on a large scale which modern civilisation has seen, and perhaps the most successful of recent demands on the perennial store of religious credulity.

The extravagant beliefs that have been entertained concerning the second coming of Christ are far too numerous to admit of detailed notice. For almost incredible absurdity the representations of the millennial reign given by Papias in his collection of the traditional sayings of Christ cannot be exceeded. "Every vine will bear 10,000 branches, every branch 10,000 shoots, every shoot 10,000 sprigs, every sprig 10,000 bunches, every bunch 10,000 berries, every berry thirty-six times twenty-five gallons of wine; and, if a saint come to pluck a berry, they will all cry out: 'Pluck me, O Saint, I am better, and praise the Lord through me.'"<sup>1</sup> The Talmud calculates the height of the men of the millennium to be, as before the Fall, of 200-900 yards; the moon shall be, according to a prophetic dictum, like the sun; the sun shall be increased 843 times; and every Israelite will beget as many children as there were Israelites going out from Egypt—60,000. Each grape will be large enough to fill the biggest ship."<sup>1</sup> Modern conceptions are not of this gross and material character, but that is chiefly because the lapse of time has thrown the fulfilment of Christ's prophecies into a remoter distance, and compelled a more spiritual interpretation of them.

<sup>1</sup> Chambers's *Encyclopedia*, art. "Millennium."

We still have prophets who stimulate the flagging energies of the faithful by announcing the imminent return of their master, and, as each prediction is falsified by fact, calmly and with undiminished confidence postponing the date of the event. It seems a pity that so much worry and uncertainty could not have been obviated by making the original predictions a little more definite. If Jesus possessed divine foreknowledge, it is unaccountable that he should have left a matter of so much importance in this hazy condition. It is at any rate a subject for congratulation that the human race has reached something like sanity on this subject. Yet it is instructive to look at the extravagances of the past. Millenarian views received a great impetus at the Reformation, when it was discovered that the official head of the Church was Antichrist, though this doctrine "was not adopted by the great body of the Reformers, but by some fanatical sects, such as the Anabaptists and the Theosophists of the seventeenth century. During the civil and religious wars in France and England, when great excitement prevailed, it was also prominent. The Fifth Monarchy Men of Cromwell's time were millenarians of the most exaggerated and dangerous sort. Their peculiar tenet was that the millennium *had* come, and *they* were the saints who were to inherit the earth. The excesses of the French Roman Catholic Mystics and Quietists terminated in chiliastic views. Among the Protestants it was during the 'Thirty Years' War that the most enthusiastic and learned chiliasts flourished. These may broadly be brought under the three chief heads of Exegetical Chiliasts, who by some biblical dates endeavoured to compute the predicted time; Alchemistic or Kabbalistic

Chiliasts, who endeavoured to hasten the period by some mystical discovery; and Politico-theocratic Chiliasts, who wished to reduce the governments of the world to a biblical standard. The awful suffering and widespread desolation of that time led pious hearts to solace themselves with the hope of a peaceful and glorious future. Since then the penchant which has sprung up for expounding the prophetic books of the Bible, and particularly the Apocalypse, with a view to present events, has given the doctrine a faint semi-theological life, very different, however, from the earnest practical faith of the first Christians."<sup>1</sup> It is added that the common Christian conception on this subject at the present day does not greatly differ from the belief of philosophers in the perfectibility of the race. Common-sense has done much towards getting rid of theological dreams and nightmares.

The precise date of the millennium has many times been fixed with great confidence by ardent believers, but one by one time has falsified their predictions, and left them high and dry on the arid sands of theologic fantasy. Swedenborg held that the last judgment took place so long ago as 1757, when the millennial era began. Dr. John Cumming believed it would commence in 1866 or 1867, but the inexorable march of time compelled him to modify his views, and, like all other visionaries, he died without seeing the dawn of his hopes. At the present time the followers of Edward Irving, an obscure sect which calls itself the "Catholic Apostolic Church," assiduously proclaim that the second coming of Christ is at hand—a doctrine which fails to impress Christ's flock,

<sup>1</sup> Chambers's *Encyclopædia*, art. "Millennium."

who do not seem over-anxious to meet their shepherd. A certain Mr. Morris Baxter was a few years ago bold enough to advertise the exact dates on which the leading events of the great millennial dream-bubble would occur—great wars in 1892, the gathering of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, the bodily ascent of 144,000 Christians to heaven on the 6th March, 1896, and so forth. Needless to say, these dates did not appear in later announcements. That is one beautiful thing about prophecy. When the event predicted does not come off you have only to give out that there was a slight error in your calculations, but that the event itself is not in the least affected, and is certain to happen a little later. Then you set to work and bring out another prophecy, which is pretty sure to turn up trumps in some sense or other. There flourished not long ago—perhaps flourishes still—a singular body known as the “Jezreelites,” who believed that the angel Gabriel favoured their leader with a brand-new “revelation” by means of a wonderful “Flying Roll.” These humourists began the erection on Chatham Heights of an enormous temple in expectation of the arrival of Jesus. But again disappointment shattered their hopes, and, like them, the temple is going to rack and ruin.

All these foolish fancies—fancies which have involved such endless dispute even among those who accept them, so much waste of time, energy, money, temper, and blood, so much spiritual terror and uneasiness—all these things are the fruits of faith. They result from too simple and literal a belief in the statements of the New Testament, and this belief or credulity rests on a theory of inspiration which the Gospels themselves do not claim, and to which they

cannot by any possibility give a rational support. It is the old story of faith uncontrolled by reason, and to the dangerous effects of such faith no limits can be set. Modern Christianity is getting to see this; it does its best to unite the two phases of thought into one, but it lacks the courage to be consistent.

The intensely bitter controversies to which faith has given rise cannot be even glanced at in this connection. Let anyone read the accounts of the interminable wrangles which the Councils of the Church endeavoured to compose; the perennial disputes about the Trinity, about the person of Christ, about the nature of the Holy Ghost, about the Immaculate Conception, about the nature of the Atonement, the future punishment of sinners, about predestination, transubstantiation, church government, baptismal regeneration, and many other theological fads, to say nothing of incense, lights, holy water, vestments, etc., and then say whether the time and ability spent on these subjects have not been thrown away, and whether the bloodshed which has so often resulted has not been a grievous sin. Some of these are matters treated of in the alleged revelation, and among them are the vital articles of the Christian faith. If they have been revealed, why are they still so unsettled? Is it not a fact that every single point is debated, even by those who hold them? It is clear they one and all are far more disputable than the elementary laws of morality, on which the civilised conscience speaks to man with a more potent authority than any scripture.

The institution of Thuggee is one of the strangest forms that religious faith has ever assumed. That it can properly be called a religion may be news to many,

but an article in the *Quarterly Review* for October, 1901, makes it clear that, in the estimation of the orthodox Thug, a divine sanction existed for his religion of murder. In 1830 there were 10,000 Thugs in India, each of whom may be credited with at least three victims annually, some of the more renowned practitioners having each, in the course of their lives, disposed of several hundreds. The system has practically been stamped out by the determined efforts of the British officials, Sir William Sleeman in particular ; but that it dies hard is shown by the fact that twenty-five cases were brought to light during the year 1897. It seems extraordinary that professional murderers, to whom a fee of one shilling was a munificent reward, and who sometimes despatched a victim for less than a penny, could possibly have been pious and God-fearing men. Yet, such are the mysterious anomalies of human nature, it seems beyond question that according to their lights the Thugs were sincerely religious. It is recorded by one investigator that an amiable Thug of his acquaintance was one of the best men he had ever known. The ordinary practice of their profession was not looked upon by these fanatics as murder at all : one Thug denied that he had ever killed any one—God killed them, he was merely the instrument. No Thug doubted the divine origin of his religion. One man, on being asked whether the Government was likely to succeed in its attempt to extirpate Thuggee, laughed scornfully as he replied : “How can the hand of man do away with the work of God ?” Nothing could shake the calm assurance with which this terrible faith was held. In the words of the *Quarterly Reviewer*—

The Thug was simply a practical God-fearing man. He would set out on his business with the quiet earnestness of one who is merely doing his duty and bringing up his son to a good professional connection; he would brutally murder twenty or thirty victims, not only with an easy conscience, but with the calm self-approval of a successful practitioner; and if, after years of business-like activity, he fell into the meddling grasp of British law, he would go to his death with the cheerful smile of a religious man who had lived well, and entertained no doubts of being munificently rewarded hereafter.

The Thug, in fact, killed, "not from depravity, but from *misguided belief*."

Christianity at least, it may be said, has no such terrible aberration of the religious instinct to show. In the eighteenth century there existed in Spain a society called the Despenadores, whose particular tenet was that it was meritorious to secure by any means the salvation of sick persons. They carried out this principle in the following manner. The invalid, having received priestly absolution, was naturally in a fit state to enter paradise; and if he died then, all would certainly be well with his soul. The society, therefore, sent an emissary into the sick chamber, presumably with the connivance of the priest, or the family, or both, and strangled or otherwise murdered the sick man, so as to make sure that he would never sin again, and in this ingenious way his salvation was supposed to be assured. It is obvious that, apart from its hideous cruelty, such a proceeding might readily be abused for purposes of private revenge or wrongful gain; but the members of the society do not appear to have perceived the moral enormity of their conduct. Their very name signified the charitable purpose of giving relief from care and pain. It was not until 1803 that these fanatics were suppressed.



One of the most striking portions of Lecky's *History of Rationalism* is that relating to the ascetic movement. Owing partly to persecution, partly to other causes, vast numbers of Christians in the fourth century retired into the Egyptian deserts, and became hermits. Here they practised austerities of the most tedious, painful, and revolting nature, the sufferings of the body being supposed to ensure the soul's entrance into heaven. Like all movements originating in pious enthusiasm and unregulated by sobriety of judgment, the epidemic for a long time became worse as it went on, each saint striving to outdo his fellows, and physical sufferings were voluntarily inflicted which it is hard to believe are not grossly exaggerated. Some of these misguided beings ate so little food that they constantly suffered the pangs of hunger, their bodies became emaciated, and their minds unhinged. A saint named John is said never to have sat or lain down for three years, but remained all that time standing at prayer, leaning on a rock, and taking no food but the sacrament, which was brought to him on Sundays. Another lived in a dried-up well, and carried about with him 150 pounds of iron; while a third slept for six months in a marsh, and exposed his naked body to the stings of venomous flies. These "saints," and many more, steadily refused on principle to wash themselves; St. Anthony, for instance, had never been guilty of washing his feet, and any monk who deviated for a time into the ways of decency and cleanliness was exposed to bitter reproaches from his holier companions. On one occasion, it is said, a stream of water was granted to a monastery in answer to prayers for something to drink, and the abbot availed

himself of the abundant supply to construct a bath ! This bath was used only once, for the divine displeasure was kindled at the impiety of using the water for the purposes of ablution, and the stream ceased to flow, nor was it until the bath had been destroyed that the supply was resumed. St. Simeon Stylites was the prince of all ascetics. He lived, it is said (presumably the account is to be credited), on the top of a pillar sixty feet high, with a rope bound so tightly round his body that it ate into his putrefying flesh, and bending his body in prayer so incessantly that people got tired of counting the rapid movements. When a worm fell from his body he would replace it in the sore, saying : "Eat what God has given you." He was honoured as the highest type of Christian saint, and when he died was followed to the grave by numbers of prelates, and a miraculous star shone over his pillar. What appalling misery this poor wretch might have saved himself had his mind not been overturned by his crazy conceptions of religion !

One would like to refer to the heresy-hunts which have so frequently taken place north of the Tweed, when some unlucky professor, for daring to make a timid advance towards larger conceptions of truth, has been set upon by the orthodox owls, mercilessly pecked at, and, if possible, driven from the nest altogether. Or it might be amusing to consider the case of the "crank" who has for many years declared, on the authority of the Bible, that the earth is not a globe, but a circular plane, and that the "lying philosophy of Newton" must necessarily "pale before the inspired teaching of Moses." But to expose in detail the absurdities into which faith, especially faith

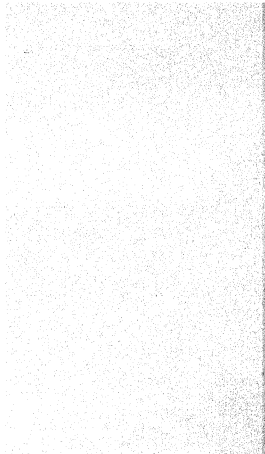
in dogmas drawn from the theory of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, has led its adherents would be an endless task; it would be to write a history of human folly. Even in this modest volume enough has been adduced to show that faith is by no means the paramount, virtuous, or trustworthy quality which it is so often assumed to be; that its effects are beneficial or otherwise according to the manner in which, and the objects on which, it is employed, and the degree of intellectual enlightenment the mind possesses; that it is a faculty to be minimised rather than increased; and that, in view of the astounding evils which in all ages, and especially since the introduction of Christianity, an ignorant faith has brought upon the world, its inculcation in the Bible is in very many respects wrong and dangerous to morals. It is, indeed, fairly open to question whether the faith in this much-vaunted "divine revelation," taken as a whole, and with special reference to its past history, has not been productive of more harm than good. And let us remember that the founder of Christianity is said to have made to his followers the divine promise: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." This statement purports to be a solemn declaration by Jesus Christ that his followers would, as long as the world lasted, be divinely guarded and enlightened. And the further promise was given that a comforter would be sent who would lead them "*into all truth.*" Has it done so? These statements are claimed to have been divinely inspired and infallibly accurate. If the claim is true that Christ has dwelt in the Christian Church throughout its whole career, it makes him practically the author, certainly the abettor, of the Church's shameful deeds. The

only alternative is that the Church is *not* divine, that its pretensions are *not* true, but figments of an ignorant imagination disordered by a false theology.

As to the present-day effects of orthodox faith, the following quotation from an article by Dr. H. J. Hardwicke in the *Agnostic Annual* of 1892 cannot but be admitted to form strong confirmation of the foregoing conclusions:—

Having recently returned from the East, where I made a special point of investigating the causes that led to the late most deplorable events in the island of Corfu, I can assure the reader that, under the influence of supernaturalism, the whole of Southern and Eastern Europe has become a hell upon earth instead of a heaven, as nature clearly intended it to be. Everywhere those of the dominant superstition maltreat others who venture to differ from them. In Spain the Romanist molests the Protestant; and I was told by an English Protestant clergyman in Seville not long ago that he was forbidden by the authorities to hold a service outside the hotel in which we lodged. In Italy and Sicily Protestants are tolerated by law, but privately outraged on every possible occasion, as I know from personal observation. In Greece the Jews are at the present time being tortured and murdered by the Christians, solely because they do not profess the same belief. In Russia a similar state of things exists.

From what I could gather when travelling recently in Greece and the Asiatic and European dominions of the Sultan of Turkey, most of the troubles that have overtaken the people in that part of the world during the last few centuries are traceable to this belief in supernaturalism. There is a constant feud going on between the Christian, the Mohammedan, and the Jew, simply on account of the different faith professed by each; and, although the Jew is the most industrious and the most capable of all, yet, because he is in a minority, his life is in constant danger. But we need not go so far afield to find instances of similar persecutions of religious minorities by majorities. The history of our own country furnishes us with a plentiful supply, from the butcheries of the Papists and Protestants in the days of the Tudors down to the imprisonment of Agnostics and Atheists a few years ago for so-called blasphemy, and the grievances experienced by scientists and advanced thinkers to-day.



Belief in supernaturalism is followed by the same results in England as in Greece, Turkey, or Russia, only there is a difference in degree.

Can any sane man imagine that the old horrors would not come to life again if they were given the chance?

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